A LADY OF ROME

F. MARION CRAWFORD

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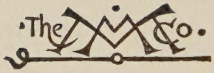
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A LADY OF ROME

BY

F. MARION CRAWFORD

AUTHOR OF "SARACINESCA," "FAIR MARGARET," ETC.

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PART I

MARIA

CHAPTER I

Maria Montalto was dressed as a Neapolitan Acquaiola and kept the lemonade stall at the Kermess in Villa Borghese. The villa has lately changed its official name, and not for the first time in its history, but it will take as long to accustom Romans to speak of it as Villa Umberto as it once did before they could give up calling it Villa Cenci. For the modern Romans are conservative people, who look with contempt or indifference on the changes of nomenclature which are imposed from time to time by their municipal representatives.

The lady was selling iced lemonade, syrup of almonds, and tamarind to the smart and the vulgar, the just and the unjust alike; and her dress consisted of a crimson silk skirt embroidered with gold lace, a close-fitting low bodice that matched it more or less and confined the fine linen she wore, which was a little open at the throat and was picked up with red ribband at the elbows, besides being embroidered in the old-fashioned Neapolitan way. She had a handsome string of pink corals round her neck, Sicilian gold earrings hung at her ears, and a crimson silk handkerchief was tied over her dark hair with a knot behind her head.

She was very good-looking, and every one said the

costume was becoming to her; and as she was not at all vain, she enjoyed her little success of prettiness very much. After all, she was barely seven-and-twenty and had a right to look five years younger in a fancy dress. She was not really a widow, though many of her friends had fallen into the habit of treating her as if she were. It was seven years since Montalto had left her and had gone to live with his mother in Spain.

They had only lived together two years when he had gone away, and observant people said that Maria had not grown a day older since, whereas they had noticed a very great change in her appearance soon after she had been married. It was quite absurd that at twenty she should have had a little patch of grey by her left temple just where the dark hair waved naturally. At that rate we should all be old at thirty.

The observant ones had noticed another odd thing about Maria Montalto. Her girl friends remembered especially a certain fearless look in her eyes, which were not black, though they were almost too dark to be called brown, and used to be most wonderfully full of warm light in her girlhood. But she had not been married many months, perhaps not many weeks, when a great change had come into them, and instead of fearlessness her friends had seen the very opposite in them, a look of continual terror, a haunted look, the look of a woman who lives in perpetual dread of a terrible catastrophe. It had been there before her boy was born, and it was there afterwards; later she had been ill for some time, after which Montalto had gone away, and since that day her eyes had changed again.

There was no terror in them now, but there was the perpetual remembrance of something that had hurt very much. I once knew a man who had been tortured by savages for twenty-four hours, and his eyes had that same expression ever afterwards. In the Middle Ages, when torture was the common instrument of the law, many persons must have gone about with that memory of suffering in their eyes, plain for every one to see. Maria looked as if she had undergone bodily torture, which she remembered, but no longer feared.

After all, her trouble had left no lines in her young features, nor anything but that singular expression of her eyes and that tiny patch of white in her hair. Her face was rather pale, but with that delicious warm pallor which often goes with perfect health in dark people of the more refined type, and the crimson kerchief certainly set it off very well, as the corals did, too, and the queer little Sicilian earrings.

The booth was gaily decorated with fresh oranges and lemons still hanging on their branches with fresh green leaves, and with many little coloured flags; the small swinging 'trumone' in which the water was iced hung in a yoke of polished brass, and the bright glasses and the bottles of syrup stood near Maria's hand on the shining metal counter.

It was a very delicately made hand, but it did not look weak, and it moved quickly and deftly among the glasses without any useless clatter or unnecessary spilling and splashing of water. Hands, like faces,

have expressions, and the difference is that the expression of the hand changes but little in many years. No artist could have glanced at Maria's without feeling that it had a sad look about it, a something regretful and tender which would have made any manly man wish to take it in his and comfort it.

The people who came to the booth gave silver for a glass of lemonade, and some gave gold, and many of them told Maria plainly that she was the prettiest sight in all the great fair. Most of those who came had never seen her before in their lives and had no idea who she was, though her name was one of those great ones that every Roman knows.

A handsome young bricklayer who had paid a franc for a glass of syrup of almonds, and who had boldly told Maria that she was the beauty of the day, asked a policeman her name.

'The Contessa di Montalto.'

The young man looked pleased, for he had secretly hoped to hear that she was nothing less than a Savelli or a Frangipane; not at all for the sake of boasting that he had received his glass from such very superior hands, but only for the honour of Rome. Yet though the name was familiar to him because he knew where the palace was, he had imagined that the family had died out.

'Which is this Montalto?' he asked.

The policeman could not answer the question, and his official face was like a stone mask. But the bricklayer had a friend who was engaged to marry a semp-

stress who worked for a smart dressmaker, and therefore knew all about society; and in the course of time he found the two walking about, and offered to pay for lemonade if they would come to the booth with him. They were not thirsty, and thanked him politely, so he asked the young woman who this Contessa di Montalto might be. She threw up her eyes with an air of compassion.

'Ah, poor lady!' she cried. 'That is a long story, for she has been alone these seven years since her husband left her. He was a barbarian, a man without heart, to leave her! Was it her fault if she had loved some one else before she was married to him?'

'Adelina is a socialist,' observed the young woman's betrothed, with a laugh. 'She believes in free love! It is all very well now, my heart,' he added, looking at her with adoring eyes, 'but after we have been to the Capitol you shall be a conservative.'

'Oh, indeed? I suppose you will beat me if I look at your friend here?' She pretended to be angry.

'No. I am not a barbarian like the Conte di Montalto. But I will cut off your little head with a handsaw.'

He was a carpenter. There were Romans of all sorts in the Villa, the smart and the vulgar, the rich and the poor, and the rich man who felt poor because he had lost a few thousands at cards, and the poor man who felt rich because he had won twenty francs at the public lottery. The high and mighty were there, buzzing about royalties on foot, and there were the

lowly and meek, eating cheap cakes under the stone pines and looking on from a distance. There were also some of the low who were not meek at all, but excessively cheeky because they had been told that all men are equal, and had paid their money at the gate in order to prove the fact by jostling their betters and staring insolently at modest girls whose fathers chanced to be gentlemen. These youngsters could be easily distinguished by their small pot hats stuck on one side, their red ties, and their unhealthy faces.

At some distance from Maria Montalto's booth there was another, where a number of Roman ladies chanced to have met just then and were discussing their friends. Most of them had a genuinely good word for Maria.

'I have not seen her in colours since her boy was born,' said the elderly Princess Campodonico. 'She is positively adorable!'

'What is her story, mother?' asked the Princess's daughter, a slim and rather prim damsel of seventeen.

'Her story, my dear?' inquired the lady with a sort of stony stare. 'What in the world can you mean?' She turned to a friend as stout, as high-born, and as cool as herself. 'I hear you have ordered a faster motor car,' she said.

The slim girl was used to her mother's danger signals, and she turned where she stood and looked wistfully and curiously at Maria di Montalto, who was some twenty yards away.

'As if I were not old enough to hear anything!' the young lady was saying to herself.

Then she was aware that the two elder women were talking in an undertone, and not at all about motor cars.

'He is in Rome,' she heard her mother say. 'Gianforte saw him yesterday.' Gianforte was the Princess's husband.

'Do you mean to say he has the courage to ——' began the other.

'Or the insolence,' suggested the first.

Then both saw that the girl was listening, and they at once talked of other things. There is an age at which almost every half-grown-up girl is figuratively always at an imaginary keyhole ready to surprise a long-suspected secret, though often innocently unconscious of her own alert curiosity. This seems to have been the attitude of Eve herself when she met the Serpent, and though we are told that Adam was much distressed at the consequences of the interview, there is no mention of any regret or penitence on the part of his more enterprising mate.

So the slim and prim Angelica Campodonico, aged barely seventeen, wondered what Maria Montalto's story might be, and just then she felt the strongest possible desire to go over to the lemonade booth to tell the pretty Countess confidentially that 'he' was in Rome, whoever 'he' was, and to see how the lady would behave. Would she think that his coming showed 'courage' or 'insolence'? It was all intensely interesting, and the girl would have been bitterly disappointed if she could have known that within twenty

minutes of her going away 'he' would actually be present and would have the insolence — or the courage! — to go directly to the Countess of Montalto's booth and speak to her under the very eyes of society. Unhappily for the satisfaction of Angelica's curiosity her mother took her away, and it was a long time before she learned the truth about Maria.

The Countess was not alone in her booth; indeed, she could not have done the manual work without a good deal of help, for at times there had been a dozen people standing before her little counter, all impatient and thirsty, and all ready to pay an exorbitant price for even a glass of water, in the name of charity. Therefore she not only had one of her own servants at work, out of sight in the little tent behind her, but several men who were more or less friends of hers had succeeded each other as her assistants during the long afternoon. They belonged to the younger generation of Romans, a set of young men whom their parents certainly never dreamt that they were rearing and whom their grandfathers and grandmothers count with the sons of Belial, largely because they love their country better than the decrepit and forlorn traditions of other days. Forty years ago it would not have occurred to a Roman gentleman to call himself an Italian, but to-day most of his children call themselves Italians first and Romans afterwards, and to these younger ones Italy is a great reality. It is true that Romans have not lost their dislike of the inhabitants of almost all other Italian cities, whether of the south or the north. The Roman

dislikes the Neapolitan, the Piedmontese and the Bolognese with small difference of degree, and very much as they and the rest all dislike each other. Italy has its sects, like Christianity, which mostly live on bad terms with each other when forcibly brought together in peaceable private life — like Presbyterians, Methodists, Anglicans, and Baptists, not to mention Roman Catholics. But as it is to be hoped that all Christians would unite against an inroad of heathens, so it is quite certain that all Italians would now stand loyally together for their country against any enemy that should try to dismember it. No one who can recall the old time before the unification can help seeing what has been built up. It is a good thing, it is a monument in the history of a race; as it grows, the petty landmarks of past politics disappear in the distance, to be forgotten, or at least forgiven, and the mountain of what Italy has accomplished stands out boldly in the political geography of modern Europe.

Moreover, those who are too young to have helped in the work are nevertheless proud of what has been done; and this is itself a form of patriotism that brings with it the honest and good hope of doing something in the near future not unworthy of what was well done in the recent past.

The young men who helped Maria Montalto to mix lemonade and almond syrup for her stall were of this generation, all between twenty and thirty years old, and mostly of those who follow the line of least resistance from the start of life to the finish. They are all

easily amused, because in their hearts they wish to be amused, and for the same reason they are easily bored when there is no amusement at all in the air. They are not bad fellows, they are often good sportsmen, and they are generally not at all vicious. They are not particularly good, it is true, but then they are very far from bad. They have less time for flirting and general mischief than their fathers had, because it now seems to be necessary to spend many hours of each day in a high-speed motor car, which is not conducive to the growth and blooming of the passion flower. It does not promote the development of the intelligence either, but that is a secondary consideration with people who need never know that they have minds. Morally, motoring is probably a good rather than an evil. People who live in constant danger of their lives are usually much more honest and fearless than those who dawdle through an existence of uneventful safety. The soldier in time of peace was the butt and laughing-stock of the ancients in the comedies of Plautus and Terence, and of the Greeks, whom those playwrights copied or adapted, but no such contemptuous use has ever been made of the sailor, whose life is in danger half a dozen times in every year.

Oderisio Boccapaduli was squeezing a lemon into a glass for Maria when he saw her hand shake as if it had been struck, and the spoon which she was going to use for putting the powdered sugar into the glass fell from her fingers upon the metal counter with a sharp clatter. Oderisio glanced sideways at her face without interrupt-

ing the squeezing of the lemon, and he saw that the characteristic warmth had disappeared all at once from her natural pallor and that her white cheeks looked as cold as if she were in an ague. She was looking down when she took up the spoon again and drew the polished brass sugar-can nearer to her. The young man was quite sure that something had happened to disturb her, and he could only suppose that she felt suddenly tired and ill, or else that some one had appeared in sight not far from the booth, whose presence was unexpected and disagreeable enough to give her a bad shock.

But he knew much more about her than Angelica Campodonico, for he was six-and-twenty, and had been seventeen himself when Maria had married, and nineteen when Montalto had left her; and since he had finished his military service and had been at large in society he had learned pretty much all that could be known about people who belonged to his set. He therefore scrutinised the faces in the near distance, and presently he saw one which he had not seen in Rome for several years; once more he glanced sideways at Maria, and her hand was unsteady as she gave the full glass to a respectable old gentleman who was waiting for it in an attitude of admiration.

The face was that of a man who was Oderisio's cousin in a not very distant degree, and who bore the honourable and historical name of Baldassare del Castiglione. He was looking straight at Maria and was coming slowly towards her.

Then Oderisio, who was an honest gentleman, saw that something unpleasant was going to happen, and on pretence of bringing fresh glasses from behind the booth, he slipped under the curtain into the tent; but instead of getting the tumblers he quietly took his hat and stick and went away, telling the servant that he would send his brother or a friend to help the Contessa, as he was obliged to go home. Moreover, he carefully avoided passing in front of the booth lest Maria should think that he was watching her, and he went off to another part of the Kermess.

Meanwhile the old gentleman drank his lemonade, and it chanced that no other customer was at the counter when Castiglione reached it and took off his hat. He was a square-shouldered man of thirty or a little less, with short and thick brown hair and a rather heavy moustache, such as is often affected by cavalrymen; his healthy, sunburnt face made his rather hard eyes look very blue, and the well-shaped aquiline nose of the martial type, with the solid square jaw, conveyed the impression that he was a born fighting man, easily roused and soon dangerous, somewhat lawless and violent by nature, but brave and straightforward.

He took off his hat and bowed as he came up, neither stiffly nor at all familiarly, but precisely as he would have bowed to ninety-nine women out of a hundred whom he knew. He did not put out his hand, and he did not speak for a moment, apparently meaning to give Maria a chance to say something.

Her hand was no longer shaking now, but the warmth

had not come back to her face, and when she slowly looked up and met the man's eyes her own were coldly resentful. She did not speak; she merely met his look steadily, by an effort of will which he was far from understanding at the moment.

'I have left Milan on a fortnight's leave,' he said quietly. 'Will you let me come and see you?'

'Certainly not.'

The decided answer was given in a voice as calm as his own, but the tone would have convinced most men that there was to be no appeal from the direct refusal. Castiglione's features hardened and his jaw seemed more square than ever. There was a look of brutal strength in his face at that moment, though his voice was gentle when he spoke.

'Have you never thought of forgiving me?' he asked.

'I have prayed that I might.' Maria fixed her eyes fearlessly on his.

'But your prayer has not been answered, I suppose,' he said, with some contempt, and with an evident lack of belief in the efficacy of prayer in general.

'No,' Maria answered. 'God has not yet granted what I ask every day.'

Castiglione looked at her still. It was strange that the face of such a man should be capable of many shades of expression, so subtle that only a portrait painter of genius could have defined them and reproduced any one of them, while most men would hardly have noticed them all. Yet every woman with whom he talked felt that his face often said more than his words.

The keen blue light in his eyes softened at Maria's simple answer to his contemptuous speech; the strength was in his face still, but without the brutality. She saw, and remembered why she had loved him too well, and when he spoke she turned away lest she should remember more.

'I beg your pardon for what I said. I am sorry. Please forgive me.'

'Yes,' she answered, 'I can forgive that, for you did not mean it.'

She looked behind her, for she had been expecting Oderisio to come back at any moment. The booth was so small that she could lift the curtain without leaving the counter. She looked under it and saw that Oderisio was gone, and she guessed that he knew something and had seen Castiglione coming; instead of being grateful to him for leaving her, she at first resented his going away and bit her lip; for she was a very womanly woman, and every woman is annoyed that any man should know any secret of hers which she has not told him. But later, when she was thinking over what had happened, she felt that Oderisio had done what a gentleman should, according to his lights; for he must have known that the two had not seen each other for years, and that such a meeting could hardly take place without some show of feeling on one side or the other.

Castiglione thanked her gently for her answer, and was going to say more, but she interrupted him, and suddenly began to busy herself with a lemon and a glass.

'I am making you a lemonade,' she said in a low voice. 'There are some people we know coming to the booth. Do not turn round to look.'

The new-comers were two rather young women and a man who was not the husband of either. Castiglione knew them too, as Maria was well aware, and she would not have let them find him there, talking to her, without so much as a lemonade for an excuse.

But the necessity for the small artifice, the low tone in which she had been obliged to speak, and, above all, the close connection of that necessity with the past, had slightly changed the situation.

'I shall go to your house to-morrow at three o'clock,' said Castiglione in a tone which the approaching party could not possibly have heard. 'Not much sugar, if you please,' he added very audibly and without pausing a second.

Again she bit her lip a little, and she drew a short breath which he heard, and she shook her head, but it was impossible to answer him otherwise, for the three new-comers were close to the booth, and a moment later they were greeting her and Castiglione. The man was one of the now numerous Saracinesca tribe, a married son of the gigantic old Marchese di San Giacinto, who was still alive, and who had married Flavia Montevarchi nearly forty years earlier. His companions were the Marchesa di Parenzo, the Roman wife of a gentleman of Bologna, and Donna Teresa Crescenzi, whose wild husband had been killed in a motor-car accident at last, and who was supposed to be looking

for another. The Marchesa di Parenzo was Maria Montalto's most faithful friend, and Donna Teresa was one of the most accomplished gossips in Rome.

An accomplished gossip is one who tells stories which sound as if they might be true. This kind is very dangerous.

Neither of these two ladies knew all the truth about Maria and Castiglione; the difference between them was that the Marchesa never talked of the story, whereas Donna Teresa had concocted a tale which she repeated at intervals in the course of years, with constantly increasing precision of detail and dramatic sequence, till society had almost accepted it as an accurate account of what had taken place.

In actual fact there was not a word of truth in it, except that Maria and Castiglione had loved each other dearly. Donna Teresa was a tolerably good-natured woman on the whole, however, and her story gave Maria credit for the most splendid self-sacrifice and the most saintly life; it represented Baldassare del Castiglione as a hero worthy of his knightly ancestor and a perfect Galahad, so far as Maria was concerned; and it threw every particle of the blame on Montalto, who had left his wife to go and live in Spain, and was therefore permanently enrolled amongst those absent friends whose healths are drunk at family gatherings with a secret prayer that they may remain absent for ever, and whose characters may be torn to rags and tatters with perfect safety.

Donna Teresa had reached the point of believing her

own story. She said she had been present at almost every crisis in the two years' drama which had so completely separated three people that they apparently meant never to set eyes on one another again; she had consoled the lovers, she had inspired them with courage to sacrifice themselves, and had metaphorically dried their scalding tears; and she had spoken her mind to that monster of brutality, the Count of Montalto. In fact, she had contributed to his determination to go away for ever and to leave his poor young wife to bring up his son in peace.

Maria knew Donna Teresa's story well, for her friend Giuliana Parenzo had told it to her; and as Maria was in no way called upon to make a public denial of it, she simply said nothing and was grateful to the gossip for treating her so kindly. Giuliana was not curious, and if she rightly guessed some part of the secret which her friend had never told her, she would not for worlds have asked her a question.

The three new-comers were all in the best possible humour, and the ladies wore perfectly new spring frocks of the very becoming model that was in fashion that spring; the one was of the palest grey and the other of the softest dove-colour. Guiliana was a dark woman with a quiet face; Teresa Crescenzi was very fair, fairer, perhaps, than all probability, and when she was excited she screamed.

'Dear Maria!' she cried in a high key, after the first words of greeting. 'You are quite adorable in that costume! The Princess Campodonico was saying just

now that it is a real pleasure to see you in colours at last. Maria has worn nothing but black and grey for seven years,' added the lively lady, turning to Castiglione.

'We all are dying of thirst,' said Giuliana, seeing the look of annoyance in her friend's face. 'We all want lemonade, and we all want it at once. Won't you let me come inside and help you?'

'No, dear,' answered Maria with a grateful look. 'I really do not need help, and you do not look at all like a Neapolitan Acquaiola in that frock! Besides, Oderisio Boccapaduli is supposed to be my adjutant, but he has gone off to smoke a cigarette.'

She was very busy, and Donna Teresa turned to Castiglione.

'And where in the world have you been since I met you in Florence last year?' she asked. 'I thought your regiment was coming to Rome at the beginning of the winter. I am sure you told me so.'

'You are quite right. My old regiment came to Rome before Christmas, but I had already exchanged into another.'

In spite of herself Maria glanced at Castiglione as he spoke, but he was not looking at her, nor even at Donna Teresa. From the place where the booth was situated he could see a certain clump of ilex-trees that grow near what has always been called the Piazza di Siena, I know not why. Maria saw that his eyes were fixed on that point, and she shivered a little, as if she felt cold.

'Why did you exchange?' Donna Teresa asked, with

the shameless directness of a thoroughly inquisitive woman. 'Did you quarrel with your colonel, or fight a duel with a brother officer?'

Castiglione smiled and looked at her.

'Oh, no! Nothing so serious! It was only because I was sure that you no longer loved me, dear Teresa!'

The younger generation of Romans, who have grown up more gregariously than their parents did, very generally call each other by their first names. Even Giuliana laughed at Castiglione's answer, and Maria herself smiled quite naturally. Five minutes earlier she would not have believed that anything could make her smile while he stood there, and she was displeased with herself for being amused. It was as if she had yielded a little where she meant never to yield again.

Donna Teresa herself laughed louder than Giuliana.

'The impertinence of the man!' she screamed. 'As if I did not know that curiosity is my besetting sin, without being reminded of it in that brutal way! I, love you, Balduccio? I detest you! You are an odious man!'

'You see!' he answered. 'I was quite right to exchange! And since you admit that you find me odious, this is an excellent moment for me to go away!'

He put down a gold piece on the metal counter to pay for the lemonade which he had not drunk, for he was a poor man and could not afford to be mean. As a matter of fact, the lemonade which Maria had so hastily begun to make for him had been finished for Teresa

Crescenzi, but no one had noticed that, and it was all for charity.

Donna Teresa protested that it was atrocious of him to go away, but he was quite unmoved. He only smiled at everybody, took young Saracinesca's outstretched hand and lifted his hat in a vague way to the three ladies without looking particularly at any of them. Then he turned and went off at a leisurely pace, and soon disappeared in the crowd. Teresa watched Maria Montalto's face narrowly, but she could not detect the slightest change of expression in it, either of disappointment or of satisfaction. Maria had recovered herself and the sweet warmth was in her pale cheeks again.

The spring sun was low and golden, and for a few moments the pretty scene took more colour; by some inexplicable law of nature the many laughing voices rang more musically as the light grew richer, just before it began to fade. It was the last day of the fair, and Maria knew that she should never forget it.

Then the chill came that always falls just before sunset in Rome, and the people felt it and began to hurry away. No one would ask for another lemonade now.

Before Maria went home she put the money she had taken into a rather shabby grey velvet bag. For a few moments she stood still, watching the fast-diminishing crowd in the distance and the changing light on the trunks of the pines. Then her eyes fell unawares on the ilexes, and she started and instantly bent down her head so as not to see them, and her hands tightened a

little on the old velvet bag she held. Without looking up again she turned and went under the curtain to the back of the booth where her footman was waiting with a long cloak that quite hid her pretty costume; and she covered her head and the crimson kerchief with a thick black lace veil, and went away towards the avenue where her brougham was waiting.

Just before she reached it, and as if quite by accident, Oderisio Boccapaduli came strolling by. He helped her to get in and begged her to excuse him if he had not come back to the booth before she had left it, adding that he had met his mother, which was quite true, and that she had detained him, which was a stretch of his imagination.

'Get in with me,' Maria answered as he stood at the open door of the carriage. 'If you are going away, too, I will take you into town and drop you wherever you like.'

He thanked her and accepted the invitation with alacrity, though he wondered why it was given. He could not have understood that she was physically afraid to be alone with her memory just then.

CHAPTER II

Maria asked her friend Giuliana Parenzo to lunch with her the next day. If Baldassare Castiglione came at three o'clock, and if it seemed wiser not to refuse him the door outright, he should at least not find her alone.

The Countess occupied one floor of a rather small house in the broad Via San Martino, near the railway station. It was a sunny apartment, furnished very simply but very prettily. After her husband had left her she had declined to accept any allowance from him and had moved out of the old palace, in which the state apartment was now shut up, while the rest of the great building was now occupied by a cardinal, an insurance company, and a rich Chicago widow. Maria lived on her own fortune, which was not large, but was enough, as she had been an only child and both her parents were dead.

Giuliana sat on her right at the small square table, and on her left was seated a sturdy boy over eight years old, and lately promoted to sailor's clothes. Why are all boys now supposed to go to sea between six and eight or nine, or even until ten and twelve?

Leone was a handsome child. He had thick brown hair and a fair complexion; his bright blue eyes flashed when he was in a rage, as he frequently was, and his

jaw was already square and strong. Maria was the only person who could manage him, and was apparently the only one to whom he could become attached. He behaved very well with Giuliana Parenzo; but though she did her best to make him fond of her, she was quite well aware that she never succeeded in obtaining anything more from him than a kind of amusing boyish civility and polite toleration. As for nurses, he had made the lives of several of them so miserable that they would not stay in the house, and Maria had now emancipated him from women, greatly to his delight. He submitted with a tolerably good grace to being dressed and taken to walk by a faithful old man-servant who had been with Maria's father before she had been born. He was not what is commonly known as a 'naughty boy'; he spoke the truth fearlessly, and did not seek delight in torturing animals or insects; but his independence and his power of resistance, passive and active, were amazing for such a small boy, and he seemed not to understand what danger was. Maria did not remember that he had ever cried, either, even when he was in arms. Altogether, at the age of eight, Leone di Montalto was a personage with whom it was necessary to reckon.

Maria knew that she loved him almost to the verge of weakness, but she would not have been the woman she was if she had been carried beyond that limit. He was all she had left in life, and so far as lay in her she meant that he should be a Christian gentleman. Nature seemed to have made him without fear; and Maria

would have him reach a man's estate without reproach. It was not going to be easy, but she was determined to succeed. It was the least she could do to atone for her one great fault.

Without reproach he should grow up, for his very being was a reproach to her. That was the bitterest thing in her lonely existence, that the sight of what she loved best, and in the best way, should always remind her of the blot in her own life, of that moment of half-consenting weakness when she had been at the mercy of a desperate, daring, ruthless man whom she could not help loving. It was cruel that her only great consolation, the one living creature on whom she had a right to bestow every care and thought of her loving heart, should for ever call up the vision of her one and only real sin.

There were moments when the mother's devotion to her child felt like a real temptation, when she asked herself in self-torment whether it was all for the boy alone, or whether some part of it was not for that which should never be, for what she had fought so hard to thrust out of her heart since the day when she had married Montalto, seven years ago. For she had loved Castiglione even then, and before that, when she had been barely seventeen and he but twenty, and they had danced together one autumn evening at the Villa Montalto, at a sort of party that had not been considered a real party, and to which her mother had taken her because she wished to go to it herself, or perhaps because she wanted Montalto to see her pretty daughter

and fall in love with her before she was out of the schoolroom.

And that was what had happened. It had all been fated from the first. On that very night Montalto fell in love with her, and she with Baldassare del Castiglione, whom she had called Balduccio, and who had called her Maria, ever since they had known each other as little children. On that night she had felt that he was a man, and no longer a boy. It was the first time she had seen him in his new officer's uniform, for it was not a week since he had got his commission. But she had hardly known Montalto, who had been brought up much more in Spain and Belgium than in Rome, because his mother was Spanish and his father had been a block of the old school, who feared the (godless) education of modern Italy.

Giuliana Parenzo was a year or two older than Maria, and the latter had felt for her the boundless admiration which very young girls sometimes have for those slightly older ones in whom they see their ideals. Giuliana had been a thoroughly good girl, had married happily, was a thoroughly good wife, and was the conscientious mother of five children; but she was very far from being the saintly heroine her friend's imagination had made of her.

She was morally lucky. Without in the least depreciating the intrinsic value of her virtue, it is quite fair to ask what she might have done if she had ever been placed in the same situation as her friend. But this never happened to her, though she was apparently not without those gifts and qualities that suggest enter-

prise on the part of admirers. She had been a very pretty girl, and in spite of much uneventful happiness and five children she was considered to be a beautiful woman at nine-and-twenty; and, moreover, she was extremely smart. In looks she was not at all like a rigid Roman matron.

But temptation had not come her way; it had passed by on the other side, and she could hardly understand how it could exist for others, since it certainly had never existed for her. There are people who go through life without accidents; they cross the ocean in utterly rotten steamers without knowing of the danger, they travel in the last train that runs before the one that is wrecked, they go out in high-speed motors with rash amateur chauffeurs who are killed the very next day, they leave the doomed city on the eve of the great earthquake, and the theatre five minutes before the fire breaks out.

Similarly, there are women who are morally so lucky that an accident to their souls is almost an impossibility. Giuliana Parenzo was one of them, and Maria's affection gave her credit for strength because she had never faced a storm. Not that it mattered much, after all. The important thing was that Maria, even at the worst crisis of her young life, had always looked upon her spotless friend as her guide and her ideal. Yet there had been a time when it would have been only too easy for her to look another way.

To-day Maria had turned to Giuliana naturally in her difficulty. It was hardly a trouble yet, but Castiglione's return and his intended visit were the first

incidents that had disturbed her outwardly peaceful life in all the seven years that had passed since her husband had left Rome. The rest had been within her.

It would not last long. Castiglione had said that he had only a fortnight's leave, and with the most moderate desire to avoid him, she need not meet him more than two or three times while he was in Rome. To refuse to receive him once would perhaps look to him like fear or weakness, and she believed that she was strong and brave; yet she did not wish to see him alone, not because she was afraid of him, but because to be alone with him a few moments, even as she had been yesterday afternoon, brought the past too near, and it hurt her.

Giuliana often lunched with her friend, and was far from suspecting that she had been asked for a special reason to-day. The two talked of indifferent matters, much as usual, and presently went into the drawing-room. It was warm already, and the blinds were closed to keep out the blazing sunlight and the reflection from the white street. The friends sat near each other, exchanging a few words now and then, and both were preoccupied, which hindered each from noticing that the other was so.

Leone knelt on a chair at the window looking down into the street between the slits of the green blinds.

'Summer is coming!' he suddenly called out, turning to look at his mother.

'Yes,' she answered, smiling at him merely because he spoke. 'It will come soon.'

'But do you know why? There are two bersaglieri in linen trousers.'

'Yes, dear. They have probably been drilling.'

'No,' answered the small boy. 'They have no knapsacks and no rifles, and they are not dusty. It is because summer is coming that they wear linen trousers. I can't see them any more. They walk so fast, you know. When shall I be a bersagliere, mama?'

'Would you not rather be a sailor?' asked Giuliana.

'Oh, no!' Leone laughed. 'A sailor? To sit inside an iron box and shoot off guns at other iron boxes? That's not fighting! But the bersaglieri, they charge the enemy and kill them with their bayonets. And sometimes they are killed themselves. But that doesn't matter, for they have had the glory!'

'What glory?' inquired Maria, watching the small boy's flashing eyes.

'They kill the enemies of Italy,' he answered. 'That's glory!'

He turned to look through the blinds again, doubtless in the hope of seeing more soldiers.

'Your son certainly has a warlike disposition, my dear,' laughed Giuliana.

But Maria did not laugh; on the contrary, she looked rather grave.

'All boys want to be soldiers,' she answered. 'I'm sure yours do, too!'

'No,' said Giuliana, rising. 'My boys are almost too peaceable! I sometimes wish they had more of Leone's spirit!'

Maria looked at her thoughtfully, thinking at first of what she had said, but suddenly realised that she had left her seat.

'You are not going already?' Maria cried in real anxiety.

'Yes, dear, I must. It's a quarter past two, and I have to allow five minutes for driving to the Quirinal.'

'You did not tell me that you had an audience to-day,' said Maria, deeply disappointed. 'I'm so sorry! I had hoped you would stay with me, and that we might go out together by and by. How long shall you be there? Can you not come directly back?'

Giuliana was a little surprised; she shook her head doubtfully.

'I'll try to come back, but I really have not the least idea how long I may be kept. You see, it's a special audience to talk about my working women's institute, and I have so much to say. I really must be going, dear!'

She glanced again at her little watch, which was fastened high up on the close-fitting dove-coloured body of her frock by a little jade bar carved to imitate the twist of a rope, and just then the very latest invention in the way of indispensable nothings. Giuliana, without the least coquetry and with very little vanity as to her appearance, always seemed to have everything new just a week sooner than any one else. The truth was that her husband was in love with her, and likely to remain so, and as he had spent a good deal of his youth in women's society, he thoroughly understood

such matters; and he superintended the docile and pretty Giuliana's toilet with quite as much care as he gave to the direction of his subordinates, though he was Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, with a very promising future before him and a good deal to do.

Giuliana kissed her friend on both cheeks and said good-bye to Leone, who did not like to be kissed at all, and in a moment she was gone.

Maria went to the window where the boy was, and, resting one hand on his shoulder, she bent down beside him and looked through the blinds.

'Have you seen any more soldiers?' she asked, after a moment, and as if the question were an important one.

'Only two,' he answered. 'They're all at dinner now. It's the time.'

Her face was close to the child's as she looked out with him; and just then he moved his head and his short and thick brown hair brushed her cheek. She started a little nervously and stood upright, looking down at the top of his head.

'What is it, mama?' he asked without taking his eyes from the blinds, for just then he saw an officer of the Piedmont Lancers crossing the street, and the beautiful uniform of that regiment was always an especially delightful sight.

'Nothing, darling,' answered Maria.

As she looked at the short and thick brown hair it seemed to draw her to it, and she bent slowly, as if she

were going to kiss it. But at that very moment, when her lips were quite near it, her eyes could see through the blinds, and she caught sight of the officer before he disappeared.

She drew back and quickly covered her lips with her hand, as if to put it between her mouth and her child's head. Castiglione had been in the Piedmont Lancers before he had exchanged, and the uniform was the one he had worn when he had first danced with her at the Villa Montalto, and afterwards, when he had first dined with her and her husband, and later again, and the last time she had seen him before he had gone away. The handsome dress was associated with all her life.

She crossed the room quickly and rang a bell, and waited a moment, listening for the servant. She would say that she did not receive, no matter who came. Then she heard footsteps outside the drawing-room door, and it opened wide and Agostino, the old butler, announced a visitor.

'Il Signor Conte del Castiglione.'

When Baldassare entered the room a moment later, Leone had left the window and was at his mother's side, holding her hand and eyeing the man he had never seen, and whose name he had never heard, with a boy's boldly inquiring stare; and the blue eyes of the man and of the child met for the first time.

'I came early,' said Castiglione as he advanced, 'for I was afraid you might be going to the races.'

'No,' Maria answered, steadying herself by the table, 'I am not going to the races to-day.'

He held out his hand, and she could not well refuse to take it, before Leone; its touch was quiet and respectful, and only lasted an instant, but it was even colder than her own.

'And this is your son,' he said, in a rather muffled voice, and he shook hands with the lad. 'I'm glad to see you,' he said. 'I knew your mother long before you were born, and we were good friends. But I have been away all these years. That is the reason why you have never seen me.'

'I understand,' Leone answered. 'Where have you been?'

Castiglione smiled at the direct question and the unhesitating tone.

'I have been in many cities. I am a soldier, and have to go where I am sent.'

At this intelligence Leone felt sure that he had found a new friend. He looked upon all soldiers as his friends, from the poor little infantryman in his long grey woollen coat to the King when he appeared in uniform. He at once laid his hand on Castiglione's arm and looked up into his face.

'Are you a bersagliere?' the boy asked.

Maria still leant against the table, and as she watched the two, the man and the boy, and saw their bright blue eyes and their short and thick brown hair, the room began to move, as if it were going slowly round her. She had never fainted in her life, but she realised that unless she made a great effort she must certainly faint now. She did not hear Castiglione's answer to the boy's

last question, but she raised her hand to her mouth, and set her small teeth upon her forefinger and bit it till a tiny drop of blood came, and the pain brought her back.

When she could speak steadily she sat down near the closed fireplace, before which there was a glass screen; she pointed to an arm-chair opposite, and Castiglione took it.

Leone had been taught that when visitors came in the afternoon he was to go away after a few minutes without being told to do so. Accordingly, as soon as he saw that his mother and Baldassare were going to talk, he went up to the latter and held out his hand.

'Good-bye,' he said gravely. 'The next time you come, please wear your uniform.'

'If I come again, I'll wear it,' answered Castiglione, smiling.

But Maria saw how earnestly his eyes studied the boy's face, and how he held the small hand as if he did not wish to let it go. He watched the sturdy little fellow till the door was shut, and Maria saw that he checked a sigh. For the first time in years the two were alone together within four walls, and at first there was silence between them.

Maria spoke first, very coldly and resentfully, for since Leone had left the room she had no reason for hiding what she felt.

'Why have you come?' she asked. 'I told you clearly that I did not wish to see you. You said, too, that you would come at three, and when you appeared I was just

going to tell Agostino that I would see no one. You came earlier than you said you would, and it was a trick to catch me. Such things are unworthy.'

Castiglione had clasped his hands on one knee, and he bent his head while she was speaking. When she had finished he looked up with an expression she had never seen in his face, and he spoke in a gentle and almost pleading tone.

'Let me tell you what I have come to Rome to say.'

'I would rather not hear it,' Maria answered coldly. 'I would rather that you should say nothing during the few minutes I shall have to let you stay — for I do not wish any one to think that I have turned you out of my house.'

Her face was like a mask, and white, for it cost her much to say the words.

'I have not come to persecute you, Maria,' he answered sorrowfully. 'I have not loved you faithfully all these years to come and pain you now.'

Maria Montalto's lip curled.

'Faithfully!' The contemptuous tone told all her unbelief.

'Yes, I mean it. I have loved you faithfully since we parted, as I loved you before.'

'I do not believe you; or I do not understand what you mean by faith.'

'It is easy to understand. Since you and I parted under the ilex-trees I have not spoken of love to any woman. I have lived a clean life.'

Something clutched at the woman's heart just then, but the next moment she spoke as coldly as before.

'It is easy to say such things,' she answered.

'What I say is true,' returned Castiglione quietly. 'But if I tell you this of myself, it is not because I hope to bring your love to life again. I know how dead that is. I know I killed it — yes, I know!'

He spoke with the tone and accent of a man in great pain, and looked down at his clasped hands; but Maria turned her face from him, for she felt the clutching at her heart again. He must not know that he was wrong, and that she loved him still in spite of everything. She would force herself not to believe him.

'How well you act!' she said, with cruel scorn.

He did not resent even that. He had violently broken and ruined her whole life long ago; why should she be kind to him?

'I am not acting, and I am not lying,' he answered gravely. 'I have been faithful to you all these years. It is no credit to me, and I ask none, for I love you truly.'

'How am I to believe you?' Maria asked, not contemptuously now, but still coldly. 'Why should I?'

He raised his eyes and met hers steadily, and she saw that there was no mistaking the truth.

'I give you my word of honour,' he said slowly, and waited.

She could not speak then, because her joy was so great, in spite of herself; and he would not say more; he only waited while she looked steadily at the mantel-

piece, choking down something and hoping that he could not see her face clearly in the rather dim light. He would not stoop to ask if she believed his word, and she was dumb. It was too much, all at once.

Presently, when she thought she could trust her voice, she tried to speak. It had seemed a long time.

'It is ——' she began.

But she broke off, for she felt the great cry coming in the word that should have followed. Therefore instead of speaking she held out her hand to him and turned her face away from his. They were just so near that by leaning far forward he could hold her fingers. He pressed them quietly for one moment, a little hard, perhaps, but with no attempt to hold them.

'Thank you,' he said, not very steadily.

She had regretted the little impulsive action at once, expecting that he would kiss her hand, as almost any man might have done with less reason. But she was glad that he had not; glad, and grateful to him. Perhaps he knew it, but she was able to speak now; he should not think that he had gained a hairbreadth's advantage.

'I am glad that you have lived a good life,' she said, much more kindly than she had spoken yet. 'But you must not call it faithfulness. You must not mean that you have been faithful to the memory of a great sin, of the worst deed you ever did. It would have been much better to forget me.'

'You do not understand,' he answered. 'My sins are on my soul, and yours with them, if you have any.

I am wicked enough to hope that I may never forget you, and that I may live till I die as I have lived since we parted. It is the least I can do, not for your sake, but out of respect for myself and regret for the worst deed I ever did. Yes, you are right, it was that. The question that fills my life is this: Can I in any way atone to you for that deed? Can you ever forgive me so far as not to hate me, and not to despise the mere thought of me, so far as to be willing that I should live in the same city with you and see you sometimes?'

He waited for her answer, but it was long before it came. When she tried to collect her thoughts she was amazed and frightened by the change that had come over her in the last few minutes. Her impulse was to confess frankly that she had always loved him, though she could not forgive him, and to implore him to go away and never to come near her again; and then she remembered that she had said those very words to him long ago under the ilex-trees in the Villa Borghese, with many cruel ones which neither had forgotten. He had given up his leave then, and had gone back to his regiment in a distant city, and he had never come near her nor written to her since.

But there was more than that, much more. He had lived a clean life. She knew the world well enough now, and she knew what the lives of most unmarried men are at Castiglione's age. Had she not a son to bring up, for whom she prayed daily that he might grow to manhood without reproach as well as without fear? She knew something of how men lived, and she

could guess, as far as an honest woman may, at the daily temptations that must assail a good-looking young officer in the smartest cavalry regiment in the country; she guessed, too, that one who chose to live very differently from most of his comrades might not always escape jests which would not turn to actual ridicule only because Castiglione was not a man to be laughed at with impunity; not by any means.

She believed him, and though she might tell him that he was faithful to a sin, to something dangerously near a crime, his faith had been for her, and she could not deny it to herself. It was for her sake that he had not lived like the rest.

Then she covered her eyes with her hand and she saw her own past life clearly, and dared to look at it. The ugly blot was there, plain enough; but if the fault had really been all his, why should the stain look so very black after all those years? He believed that he had sinned against her, not with her; and so she had told herself — and had told him so with bitter reproaches before they had parted. Was it quite, quite true? If it was, she had no cause to reproach herself for the catastrophe. Yet since that hour she had accused herself daily. Of what? Of having loved Baldassare del Castiglione? But she had loved him innocently and dearly when she was seventeen, and ever since. Her mother had known it, but he was poor, he was no match for a girl who was something of an heiress. She had done as many other girls did and always will do; she had yielded to parental pressure, she had promised

herself to forget, thinking it would be easy; she had married Montalto, making the great marriage of that season; she had begun to be a wife believing, poor soul, that she had done right in obeying her mother as a daughter should. But she had not forgotten.

Even that was no sin. It was her misfortune, and the natural consequence of a false system that sacrificed too much to money, or to money and name. She had actually been vain of marrying Montalto, for though he bore only the title of count, he was an authentic Count of the Empire, which is quite a different matter from being a Roman 'conte.' It had been a very great marriage indeed, and Maria had really been a little foolishly vain of becoming his wife. He had two historic castles in Italy as well as an historical palace in Rome and an historical estate on the Austrian frontier, and he was heir to historical lands in Spain by his mother; and he had a great number of historic ancestors who had been Counts of the Empire and Grandees of Spain, and hereditary Knights of the Sovereign Order of Malta. Everything about Montalto was historical, including his grave face and pointed black beard, and he might have passed for the original of more than one portrait in his historic gallery. His family even had a well-attested White Lady who appeared when one of them was going to die!

But all these things could not make the young wife forget Baldassare del Castiglione, who was only a more or less penniless officer in the Piedmont Lancers. The worst of it was that Montalto liked him, instinctively

because his name was also so extremely historical, and fatally because husbands are the last to discover their wives' preferences. Montalto had thrown Maria and Castiglione together.

She had gone to confession again and again, for she had been brought up to be very devout. Her confessor told her each time that she must avoid the man she loved and pray to forget him. She answered that her husband liked him and constantly asked him to the house; that she could not beg Montalto to change his attitude towards a friend without giving a good reason; and that the only reason she had was that she loved Baldassare with all her heart, though she was told it was wrong now that she was married, and she prayed that she might forget him and love her husband. Her confessor, having ascertained by further questions that she and Castiglione had avowed their love for each other in bygone days, long before her marriage, bade her appeal to the young man's generosity, and beg him to refuse Montalto's constant invitations and to see her as little as possible. But the confessor did not know the man. Maria followed the priest's advice, but Baldassare utterly refused to do what she asked, and became more and more unmanageable from that day. Surely that was not her fault. It was not with this that she reproached herself. She had been afraid to tell Montalto, that was true; there had been one day, at last, when she should have confessed to him, instead of to the priest; she should have thrown herself upon his mercy and implored him to take her away. But then

she had lacked courage. She had told herself that her husband loved her devotedly in his silent, respectful way, and that to tell him the truth would be the ruin of his happiness. She felt so sure that his honour was safe! And meanwhile Castiglione grew more passionate every day, more reckless and more uncontrollable; and she loved him the more, and he knew it, though she would not tell him so. She accused herself of that. She should have gone to her husband for protection, for his happiness was far less to him then than his honour. Some women would have invented an untruth as a means justified by the end. Maria might have told Montalto that she was suffering a persecution odious to her; she would have saved her husband's honour and happiness together, and would even have raised her higher in his esteem. But she could not do it. It would be base, treacherous, and faithless. So she waited and prayed against her heart, and hoped against Castiglione's nature. Then came the evil hour and it was too late; too late even to lie. She accused herself of having put off too long the one act that could have saved her. But still, and to the end, she had told herself that she had been strong, that she had resisted her own passion as well as the ruthless man who loved her. She had been innocent, she repeated; and she had told her confessor nothing more until she believed that she had changed, and that she hated the man she had loved so well. Then the priest, who was not worldly wise, warned her gently against anything so un-Christian as hatred, and counselled her to forget and to grow

indifferent and to devote herself to her husband's happiness. That sounded very easy to the poor priest.

After that she had altogether given up asking advice of him, and she had let herself be guided by her own sense of honour. Besides, the day soon came when Montalto accused her; and he would not have believed her if she had thrown the whole blame on her lover, for she could not lie and say she had never loved him. So she had not defended herself, and the great wave had gone over her head, and her husband, broken-hearted, had left her for ever; but he had done it in such a way that there had been no open scandal. He had gone to Spain and had come back again, and had gone away again and had stayed longer; he had spoken to his friends of his mother's wretched health; she could not live in Italy, and Maria could not live in Spain, and he could not be in both places at once. The separation, so far as the world saw it, came by degrees, till it was permanent. Monltalto and his wife were not the first couple that had separated quietly, without quarrelling in public, simply because they did not like each other. People did not always know where Maria spent her summers with her child, and the good-natured ones used to say that she saw her husband then; and she lived in such a way in Rome that the blame was all laid on Montalto, and Teresa Crescenzi's story was believed. Montalto was a brute, who had often struck his wife when he was in one of his fits of anger, and she was little less than a saint.

Castiglione sat waiting for his answer. Would she

tell him that he might come back and live near her? Or would she grow hard and cold once more, and bid him go away again, and for ever?

After a long time she raised her head and looked at him quietly.

'I cannot answer you at once,' she said; 'but I promise that I will. You said yesterday that you had a fortnight's leave. When I have made up my mind what to do I shall let you know, and you must come and see me again.'

Castiglione shook his head gravely and said nothing.

'What is the matter?' asked Maria.

'I suppose you are going to ask advice of your confessor,' he answered very sadly, and not at all in contempt.

But Maria lifted her head proudly.

'No,' she said, 'I am going to ask myself what is right. And in my thoughts my child shall be the man I hope to make him, and I will ask him what is honourable.'

'Will you not trust me for that?' Castiglione asked, and his face lightened.

'That I even consent to ask myself shows that I trust you more than I did when you surprised me here not half an hour ago. And now please leave me, for I want to be alone. Perhaps I shall send for you tomorrow, or perhaps not for a week. If we chance to meet anywhere, come and speak to me, for people will think it strange if we avoid each other. But I shall

ask you to come here for the answer to your question.'

'Thank you,' he answered gratefully.

Their hands touched each other for a moment, but neither spoke again, and he went quietly out.

CHAPTER III

Maria did not send for Castiglione the next day, nor during a number of days afterwards, and Giuliana Parenzo saw that she was very much preoccupied and was not looking well. The elder woman was far too good a friend to ask questions, and when the two were together she did her best to amuse Maria by her talk. The Marchesa was not particularly witty, but she sometimes told a story with little touches of humour that were quite her own. Very good women are rarely witty, but they often have a happy faculty of seeing the funny side of things. Wit wounds, but humour disarms.

Giuliana saw, too, that Maria did not like to be alone, even with Leone. The truth was that she slept little and was very nervous. Something had come back from the past to haunt her; often a nameless horror came near her, not at night only, for it was not the fear of an overwrought imagination, but in broad daylight too, when she was alone and chanced to be doing nothing. It was the more dreadful because she could not define it; she could not say that it was caused by the question Castiglione had asked her, and which she had promised to answer, but when she thought of that her mind refused to be reasonable, and the horror came upon her,

and she felt that utter ruin was close at hand, lying in wait for her. She remembered the sensation well in the old days; she had sometimes fancied then that she was going mad, and had made great efforts to control herself, but she had never thought of asking a doctor what it was, for she had believed, and believed now, that it was a state of mind rather than the mere effect of anxiety and mental fatigue on her body. So she suffered much, and quite uselessly; but that was a small matter compared with the fact that she had promised Castiglione an answer before his fortnight's leave was over, and that after several days she was no nearer to finding one than when he had left her.

Again and again she thought of telling Giuliana all her trouble and asking her advice, but she was always deterred by an inward conviction that her friend would not understand. She was mistaken in this, but she could not believe that she was. Giuliana knew something, of course; all Rome believed Teresa Crescenzi's story, of which the starting-point was that she had loved Baldassare del Castiglione innocently, and it was Giuliana who had repeated the tale to her. Maria had shaken her head, and had answered that there was not much truth in it, but that people might as well believe it as invent any other story, since she would never tell any one, not even Giuliana, exactly what had happened.

'It does not concern me only,' she had said gravely.

Giuliana had asked no questions, and Maria had been sure that there would never be any need of referring to her secret again.

But now the past had come back to ask a question which she could not answer. She had been in earnest when she had told Baldassare proudly that she did not mean to go to a priest for advice. He disliked all priests out of prejudice, as she knew. There might be good and bad soldiers, lawyers, writers, artists, or workmen, but in his estimation there could be very few good priests. Yet it was not to please him that she had said she would not go to her confessor; it was simply because she was quite sure that she could trust her own conscience and her own sense of honour to show her the right way; and perhaps she might have trusted both if her nerves had not failed her at the critical moment and left her apparently helpless. She was in great need of help and advice, and did not know where to go for either.

Meanwhile she had not met Castiglione again. The season was over, and even at its height she did not go out much. Society is always dull when one has no object in joining in its inane revels — love, ambition, stupid vanity, or a daughter to marry — unless, indeed, one possesses the temperament of a butterfly combined with the intelligence of an oyster. So it had been quite natural that Maria should not have met Castiglione during those days, and she had not chanced to meet him in the street. On his side, he had kept away from the part of the city in which she lived, but he had gone to every friend's house and public place where he thought there was a possibility of meeting her.

After a week they met by what seemed an accident

to them both. Maria was almost ill, and could no longer bear her trouble without some help. There was in Rome a good priest of her own class — a man in ten thousand, a man of heart, a man of courage, a man of the highest honour and of the purest life. If she had not always disliked the idea of meeting her confessor in the world, she would have chosen this man for hers long ago. If he had been in Rome in the darkest months of her life she would certainly have gone to him for advice; but he had then been working as a parish priest in a remote and fever-stricken part of the Maremma, and it was because his health had broken down that he had been obliged to give up his labours and come back to Rome. He was now a Canon of Saint Peter's, and was employed as Secretary to the Cardinal Vicar, but found time to occupy himself with matters nearer to his heart. His name was Monsignor Ippolito Saracinesca; he was the second son of Don Giovanni, the head of the great family, and he was about forty years old.

To him Maria Montalto determined to go in her extremity. She was not quite sure how she should tell him her story, but for the sake of what she had said to Castiglione she would not put it in the form of a confession. She would not need to tell so much of it but that she could lay it before him as an imaginary case — which is a foolish device when it is meant to hide a secret, but is useful as a means of communicating one that is hard to tell.

Monsignor Saracinesca was generally at Saint Peter's

at about eleven o'clock, and Maria made sure of finding him there by telephoning to the Saracinesca palace, in which he had a small apartment of his own. At half-past ten she left her house alone, took a cab and drove across Rome to the Basilica. She got out at the front and went up the steps, for she had never before been to see any one in the Sacristy, and was not quite sure of what would happen if she went directly to it at the back of the church.

She entered on the right-hand side, by force of habit. There is a very heavy wadded leathern curtain there, and she had to pull it aside for herself, which was not easy. Just as she was doing this, and using all her strength, some one pushed the curtain up easily from within, and she found herself face to face with Baldassare del Castiglione, and very near him. She started violently, for she was even more nervous than usual. He himself was so much surprised that he drew his head back quickly; then he bent it silently and stood aside, holding up the curtain for her to pass, as if not expecting that she would stop to speak to him.

'Thank you,' she said, going in.

She tried to smile a little, just as much as one might with a word of thanks; but the effort was so great, and her face was so pale and disturbed, that it made a painful impression on him, and he watched her anxiously till she had gone a few steps forward into the church, for he was really afraid that she might faint and fall, and perhaps hurt herself, and there was no one near the door just then to help her.

But she walked straight enough, and he had just begun to lower the heavy curtain, turning his head as he passed under it, when he heard her call him sharply.

'Balduccio!'

It was very long since she had called him familiarly by his first name, and his heart stood still at the sound of her voice. A moment later he was within the church, and met her as she was coming back to the door.

'You called me?'

'Yes.'

They turned to the right into the north aisle, and walked slowly forwards, side by side. There were not many people in the Basilica at that hour, for it was a week-day, and the season of the tourists was almost over. At some distance before them, two or three people were kneeling before the closed gate of the Julian Chapel. Maria and Castiglione were as much alone as if they had been in the country, and as free to talk, for no conversation, even in an ordinary tone, can be heard far in the great cathedral. Nevertheless Maria did not speak.

'You are ill,' Castiglione said, breaking the silence at last. 'Let me take you to your carriage.'

'No. I came here for a good purpose, and I cannot go home without doing what I mean to do.'

'I wish with all my heart that I had not come back to Rome to disturb your peace! It is my fault that you are suffering.'

'No. It is not your fault.' She spoke gently. 'It is a consequence, that's all. You had a right to ask me

that question, and you have a right to an answer. But I cannot find one. That is what is troubling me.'

'You are kind to me,' said Castiglione. 'Too kind,' he added, and she knew by his tone how much he was moved.

She turned in her walk before she answered, for they were already near the Julian Chapel.

'No,' she said after a minute, and she bent her head. 'Not too kind — if you knew all.'

He looked quickly at her face, but she did not turn to him. His heart beat hard and his throat felt suddenly dry.

'Don't misunderstand me,' she said, still looking steadily down at the pavement. 'I meant, if you knew how much I wish to be just — to myself as well as to you, Balduccio.'

'I do not want justice,' he answered sadly. 'I ask for forgiveness.'

'Yes. I know.'

She said no more, and they walked slowly on. At the little gate of Leo the Twelfth's Chapel she stopped, and she took hold of the bars with both hands and looked in, leaving room for him to stand beside her.

'Justice,' she cried in a low voice, 'justice, justice! To you, to me, to my husband! God help us all three!'

He did not understand, but he felt that a change had come over her since he had seen her a week earlier, and that it was in his favour rather than against him.

'Justice!' he repeated after her, but in a very different tone. 'It would have been justice if I had put a

bullet through my head when I went home that night!'

Maria's hands left the bars of the gate and grasped Castiglione's arm above the elbow and shook it a little.

'Never say that again!' she cried in a stifled voice. 'Promise me that you will never think it again! Promise!'

He was amazed at her energy and earnestness, and he understood less and less what was passing in her heart.

'I can only promise you that I will never do it,' he answered gravely.

'Yes,' she cried in the same tone, 'promise me that! It is what I mean. Give me your sacred word of honour! Take oath to me before the Cross — there — do you see?' she pointed with one hand through the bars to the Crucifix in the stained window, still holding him with the other. 'Swear solemnly that you will never kill yourself, whatever happens!'

He could well have asked if she loved him still, and she could not have denied it then; but he would not, for he was in earnest too. He had not meant to trouble her life so deeply when he had come to ask her forgiveness; far less had he dreamt that the old love had survived all. A great wave of pure devotion to the woman he had wronged swept him to her feet.

It was long since he had knelt in any church; but now he was kneeling beside her as she stood, and he was looking up to the sacred figure, and his hands were joined together.

'You have my word and promise,' he said in deep emotion. 'Let the God you trust be witness between you and me.'

He heard a soft sound, and she was kneeling beside him, close to the bars. Then her ungloved hand, cold and trembling, went out and rested lightly on his own for a moment.

'Is it forgiveness?' he asked, very low.

'It is forgiveness,' she said.

He pressed his forehead against his folded hands that rested upon the bars. Then he understood that she was praying, and he rose very quietly and drew back a step, as from something he held in great reverence, but in which he had no part.

She did not heed him and remained kneeling a little while, a slight and rarely graceful figure in dark grey against the rich shadows within the chapel. If any one passed near, neither he nor she was aware of it, and there was nothing in the attitude of either to excite surprise in such a place, except that it is unusual to see any one praying just there.

Maria rose at last, stood a few seconds longer before the gate, and then turned to Baldassare. Her face had changed since he had last seen it clearly; it was still pale and full of suffering, but there was light in it now. She stood beside him and looked at him quietly when she spoke.

'I have not given you all my answer yet,' she said. 'I will tell you why I came here, because I wish to be quite frank in all there is to be between us. I told you

the other day that I would not go to my confessor for advice. At least, that is what I meant to say. Did I?'

'Yes. That was what you said.'

'I shall keep my word. But I am going for help to a friend who is a priest, because I have broken down. I thought I could trust my own conscience and my own sense of honour; I thought I could fancy my boy a man, and in imagination ask him what his mother should do. But I cannot. I am very tired, and my thoughts are all confused and blurred. Do you understand?'

'Yes,' said Castiglione; but in spite of himself his face betrayed his displeasure at the thought that an ecclesiastic should come between them.

'I am going to see a priest whom I trust as a man,' she went on. 'I am going to Monsignor Saracinesca.'

'Don Ippolito?' Castiglione's brow cleared, and he almost smiled.

'Yes. Do you know him?'

'I know him well. You could not go to a better man.'

'I am glad to hear you say that. I may not follow his advice, after all, but I am sure he will help me to find myself again.'

'Perhaps.' Castiglione spoke thoughtfully, not doubtfully. Then his face hardened, but not unkindly, and the manly features set themselves in a look of brave resolution. 'Before you go let me say something,' he went on, after the short pause. 'You have given me more to-day than I ever hoped to have from you, Maria. I will ask nothing else, since the mere thought of seeing

me often has troubled you so much. I will leave Rome to-day, and I will not come back — never, unless you send for me. Put all the rest out of your mind and be yourself again, and remember only that you have forgiven me the worst deed of my life. I can live on that till the end. Good-bye. God bless you!'

She had been looking down, but now she raised her eyes to his, and there were tears in them that did not overflow. He held out his hand, but she would not take it.

'Thank you,' she said. 'You are brave and kind, but I will not have it so. I may ask you to go away when your leave is over, but not to stay always, and after a time we shall meet again. Before going you must come and see me. I will write you a line to-night or to-morrow. Good-bye now, but only for to-day.'

She smiled faintly, bent her head a little, and turned from him to cross the nave on her way to the Sacristy. He stood by the pillar and watched her, sure that she would not look back. She moved lightly, but not fast, over the vast pavement. When she was opposite the Julian Chapel, which is the Chapel of the Sacrament, she turned towards it and bent her knee, but she rose again instantly and went on till she disappeared behind the great pilaster of the dome, at the corner of the south transept.

Then Castiglione went slowly and thoughtfully away, happier than he had been for a long time.

But Maria went on, and glanced at her watch, and hastened her steps. She left the church and traversed

the long marble corridors, where all kinds of people come and go on all sorts of business whenever the Basilica is open. In the great central hall of the Sacristy, which is as big as an ordinary church, she asked the first acolyte she met for Monsignor Saracinesca.

He was close at hand, in the Chapter-House. 'Would the lady give her revered name?' 'The Countess of Montalto.' The young man in the violet cassock bowed low. 'Monsignor Saracinesca would certainly see her Excellency.' 'Her Excellency' thanked the young man and stood aside to wait, out of the way of the many canons and other ecclesiastics, and choirmen, and singing boys, and other acolytes who were all moving hither and thither as if they were very busy about doing nothing in a hurry. In less than half a minute Ippolito Saracinesca joined her.

The churchman was a man of forty or near that, but was already very grey, and thin almost to emaciation. He had the wan complexion of those who have lived long in feverish parts of Italy, and there were many lines of suffering in his refined features, which seemed to be modelled in wax. In his youth he had been said to be like his mother's mother, and a resemblance to her portrait was still traceable, especially in his clear brown eyes. The chief characteristics of the man's physical nature were an unconquerable and devoted energy that could defy sickness and pain, and a very markedly ascetic temperament. Spiritually, what was strongest in him was a charity that was active, unselfish, wise and just, and that was, above

all, of that sort which inspires hope in those whom it helps, and helps all whom it finds in need.

It was said in the precincts of the Vatican that Monsignor Saracinesca was likely to be made a cardinal at an early age. But the poor people in the Maremma said he was a saint who would not long be allowed to suffer earthly ills, and whose soul was probably already in paradise while his body was left to do good in this world till it should wear itself out and melt away like a shadow.

Ippolito Saracinesca had known only one great temptation in his life. Unlike most people who accomplish much in this world, he was a good musician, and was often tempted to bestow upon a perfectly selfish pleasure some of that precious time which he truly believed had been given him only that he might use it for others. More than once he had bound himself not to touch an instrument nor go to a concert for a whole month, because he felt that the gift was absorbing him too much.

This was the friend to whom Maria Montalto had come for advice and help, and of whom Castiglione had said that she could not have chosen a better man.

'There is no one in the Chapter-House,' he said, after the first friendly greeting. 'Will you come in and sit down? I was trying to decide about the placing of another picture which we have discovered amongst our possessions.'

He led the way and Maria followed, and sat down

beside the table on one of the big chairs which were symmetrically ranged against the walls.

'Please tell me how I can serve you,' said Don Ippolito.

'It is not easy to tell you,' Maria answered. 'I am in great perplexity and I need advice — the advice of a good man — of a friend — of some one who knows the world.'

'Yes,' said Monsignor Saracinesca, folding his transparent hands and looking at one of Melozzo da Forlì's inspired angels on the opposite wall. 'So far as you care to trust me as a friend and one who knows something of the world, I will do my best. But let us understand each other before you say anything more. This is not in any way a confession, I suppose. You wish to ask my advice in confidence. Is that it?'

'Yes, yes! That is what it is!'

'And you come to me as to a friend, rather than as to a priest?'

'Oh, yes! Much more.'

'And you trust me, merely as you would trust a friend, and without the intention of putting me under a sacred obligation of silence, by which the life and welfare of any one might hereafter be endangered. Is that what you mean?'

'Yes, distinctly. But that will never happen. I mean that no one's life could ever be in danger by your not telling. At least, I cannot see how.'

'Strange things happen,' said Don Ippolito, still looking at the angel. 'And now that we understand

each other about that, I am ready. What is the difficulty?'

Maria rested her elbow on the corner of the big table and shaded her eyes with her hand for a moment. It was not easy to tell such a story as hers.

'Do you know anything about my past life?' she began timidly, and glancing sideways at him.

He turned his brown eyes full to hers.

'Yes,' he said, without hesitation. 'I do know something, and more than a little.'

She was surprised, and looked at him with an expression of inquiry.

'I have always known your husband very well,' he said. 'He wrote to me for advice when there was trouble between you. I was in the Maremma then.'

'And it was you who advised him to leave me! Ah, I did not know!'

Maria drew back a little proudly, expecting him to admit the imputation.

'No,' answered Don Ippolito. 'I did not, but he thought it wiser not to take the advice I gave him.'

Maria's expression changed again.

'Do you know who was — who — was the cause of his going away?'

'Yes. I am afraid every one knows that. It was Baldassare del Castiglione, and he is in Rome again.'

'Yes,' Maria replied, repeating his words, 'he is in Rome again.'

He thought he had made it easy for her to say more, if she wished to tell all, but she was silent. He had

heard Montalto's story from beginning to end, and upon that he judged her, of course, as she had allowed herself to be judged by her husband, without the least suggestion of defence. After all, how could either of the two men judge her otherwise? How could she tell now what she had once called the truth? How near the truth was it? She would put her question as best she could.

'My excuse is that we loved each other very, very much,' she said in a low and timid voice. 'It was long before I married,' she added, a little more firmly, for she was not ashamed of that. 'But we parted' — her voice sank to a whisper — 'we parted when it was too late. And we have never met, nor ever written one word to each other since.'

As she pronounced the last sentence she raised her head again, for she knew what that separation had cost, in spite of all — in spite of what she had called the truth.

'That was right,' Don Ippolito said. 'That was your duty; but it was brave of you both to do it.'

She felt encouraged.

'And now he is in Rome again,' she went on. 'He has come on leave for a few days. He came on purpose to ask my forgiveness, after all these years, because there was something to forgive — at least — he thought there was ——'

She broke off, quite unable to go on.

'You were very young,' suggested Don Ippolito, helping her. 'You had no experience of the world.

Such a man would have a very great advantage over a very young woman who had been attached to him when a girl and was unhappily married.'

But Maria had clasped her hands desperately tight together before her on the edge of the table, and she bent down now and pressed her forehead upon them. She spoke in broken words.

'No, no! I know it now! It was not — not what I thought — oh, I can't tell you! I can't, I can't!'

She was breaking down, for she was worn-out and fearfully overwrought. Then Monsignor Saracinesca spoke quietly, but in a tone of absolute authority.

'Tell me nothing more,' he said. 'This is not a confession, and I cannot allow you to go on. Try to get control of yourself so that you may go home quietly.'

He rose as he spoke, but she stretched her hand out across the table to stop him.

'No — please don't go away! I have said I forgive him — if there is anything to forgive — may I say that he is to come back? May I see him sometimes? We are so sure of ourselves, he and I, after all these years ——'

Monsignor Saracinesca's brows bent with a little severity.

'Montalto is living,' he said, 'and he is a broken-hearted man. Since you and he parted you have borne his name as honourably as you could, you have done what was in your power to atone for your fault by not seeing your lover. I am frank, you see. Montalto knows how you have lived and is not unjust nor

ungrateful. But for his mother, I think a reconciliation would be possible.'

Maria started at the words, and turned even paler than before.

'A reconciliation!' she cried in a low and frightened voice.

'Yes,' answered Don Ippolito, who had resumed his seat. 'He loves you still. It is my firm belief that he has never bestowed a thought on any other woman since he first wished to marry you. I know beyond all doubt that since he left you he has led a life such as few men of the world ever lead. No doubt he has his defects, as a man of the world. I daresay he is not one of those men with whom it is easy to live, and he is a melancholy and depressing person. But so far as the rest is concerned ——'

He stopped, feeling that he was perhaps defending his friend too warmly. Maria had bent her head again, and sat with her hands lying dejectedly on her knees.

'You know more,' she said sadly. 'He has written you that he is coming back!'

'No. I only think it possible. But if he did, could you refuse to live under his roof? Has he wronged you?'

'He meant to be just! But if he should come back — oh, no, no, no! For God's sake, not that!'

She bent her head lower still, and spoke scarcely above a whisper.

'Remember that he has the right, that it lies with him to forgive, not with you. If he should do that,

and should come, would you not be glad to feel that after all you had done your best? That so far as you could help it you had not seen your lover, nor encouraged him, nor given him the slightest cause to think you would? You could at least receive your husband's forgiveness with a clear conscience. At least you could say that you had not failed again!'

Don Ippolito waited a moment, but Maria could not speak, or had no answer ready for him. He went on, quietly and kindly.

'But if you allow Castiglione to come back and live here, and to see you, even rarely, it will all be different. Think only of what the world will say; and what the world says will be repeated to your husband. You have broken his heart, and all but ruined his life; remember that he loves you as much as your lover ever did; think what he has felt, what he has suffered! And then consider, too, that if anything has softened the bitterness of his pain, it has been the faultless life you have led since. Before God it is enough to do right, but before the world it is not. Men do not accept the truth unless it is outwardly proved to them. That is a part of the social contract by which our outward lives are bound. Allow Castiglione to come to Rome, to be seen with you and at your house, even now and then, and the world will have no mercy. It will say that you are tired of your loneliness, and have taken him back to be to you what he was. Then people will laugh at Teresa Crescenzi's clever story instead of believing it. You came to me as to a friend, and as what you call

a man of the world, and I give you what I think will be the world's view. Am I right, or not?'

There was a long pause. Then Maria tried to meet the good man's earnest eyes, but her own wandered to one of the angels on the wall.

'You are right,' she said in a low voice. 'Yes, you are right. I see it now.'

Her gaze was fixed upon the lovely frescoed head, with its glory of golden hair and its look of heavenly innocence. But she did not see it; she was thinking that if she did right she must tell Castiglione never to come back, and that the aching, lonely life that had seemed once more so full for a brief space was to begin again to-morrow, and was to last until she died. And she was thinking that her husband might come back.

Monsignor Saracinesca waited quietly after she had spoken, for since she admitted the truth of what he urged he felt that there was nothing more to say. After a little while Maria collected her strength for the effort and rose from her seat, still resting one hand on the great table.

'Thank you,' she said. 'You have been very kind. All you have told me is true. I shall try to follow your advice.'

'I hope you will,' answered the Churchman. 'You will not find it so hard as you think.'

She smiled faintly, as gentle people do sometimes when they are in great pain and well-disposed persons tell them that suffering is all a matter of imagination.

'Oh, no!' she answered. 'I shall find it very, very hard.'

The grey-haired man sighed and smiled at her so sadly and kindly that she felt herself drawn to him even more than before. She was standing close to him now, and looked up trustfully to his spiritual face and deeply thoughtful eyes.

'I did not know I loved him so much till he came back,' she said simply. 'How could I? I did not guess that I had forgiven him long ago!'

'Poor child! God help you!'

'I need help.' She was silent for a moment, and then looked down. 'Do you write to my husband?' she asked timidly.

'Sometimes. I have little time for writing letters. Should you like to send him any message?'

'Oh, no!' she cried in a startled tone. 'But oh, if you write to him, don't urge him to come back! Don't make him think it is his duty. It cannot be his duty to make any one so unhappy as I should be!'

'I shall not give him any advice whatever unless he asks for it,' replied Don Ippolito, 'and if he does, I shall answer that I think he should write to you directly, for I would rather not try to act as his adviser. I told you that he did not take my advice the first time.'

'Yes — but — you have been so kind! Would you tell me what you wished him to do then?'

The priest thought a moment.

'I cannot tell you that,' he said presently.

Maria looked surprised, and shrank back a little, suspecting that he had suggested some course which might have offended or hurt her. He understood intuitively.

'It would be a betrayal of confidence to Montalto,' he added, 'to tell you what I advised him, and what he did not do. But I still think it would have been better for both of you if he had done it.'

Maria looked puzzled.

'I am sorry,' he said, in a tone from which there was no appeal, 'but I cannot tell you.'

She looked at him a little hardly at first; then she remembered what every one in Rome knew, that the delicate, shadow-like man with the clear brown eyes had risked being tried for murder when he was a young priest rather than betray a confession which had been anything but formal. Her tired face softened as she thought of that.

'I am sorry I asked you,' she said. 'I did not mean to be inquisitive.'

'It was natural that you should ask the question,' he answered, 'but it would not have been quite honourable in me to answer it.'

'I trust you all the more because you refused me,' she said. 'And now I must be going, for I have kept you a long time.'

'Scarcely a quarter of an hour.' He smiled as he glanced at the hideous modern clock on the table.

She left him after thanking him and pressing his thin, kindly hand, and she made her way back to the church, feeling a little faint.

When she was gone Monsignor Saracinesca returned to the question of the picture which was to be hung, but for a while he could not give it all the attention

that a beautiful Hans Memling deserved. He was thinking of what he had said to Maria, and not only of that, but of what he had said to Baldassare del Castiglione a quarter of an hour earlier.

For that was the coincidence which had brought the two together that morning at the door of the church. Castiglione had taken it into his head to see Don Ippolito on the same day; like Maria, he had telephoned to the palace and had learned that his old acquaintance was usually to be found in the Sacristy about eleven; being a soldier, he had gone punctually at the hour, whereas Maria had not arrived till fifteen or twenty minutes later, and it was therefore almost a certainty that they should meet.

It had not been easy for Don Ippolito, taken by surprise as he was. But Castiglione had put his case as one man of honour may to another, and had told as much of the truth as he might without casting the least slur on Maria's good name. He had loved her before her marriage, he had said; he loved her still. After she had been married he had left her no peace, and Montalto had made him the reason for leaving her. She had bidden him, Castiglione, to go away and never see her again. He had so far obeyed as to stay away several years. He had come back at last to ask her forgiveness; he was not sure of obtaining it — he had not yet met her in the church — but he came to Don Ippolito as a friend. His love for Maria was great, he said, but even if she forgave him, he would never see her again rather than be the cause of any further trouble

or anxiety to her. What did Don Ippolito think? Don Ippolito considered the matter for a few minutes, and then said that in his opinion any renewal of friendly intercourse between Castiglione and the Countess would surely bring trouble and would inevitably cause her anxiety. If Castiglione loved her in the way he believed he did, he would think more of her welfare than of the pleasure he would have in seeing her. If he was sure that his thoughts of her were what he represented them to be, he could write to her, and she might write to him if she thought fit. The prelate refused to say more than that, but the opinion was delivered in such manly and direct words that Castiglione was much impressed by it; and when, in the church, he had generously offered to leave Rome at once, because he saw in Maria's face all the trouble and anxiety he feared for her, he had spoken with Ippolito Saracinesca's honourable words still ringing in his ears. It was no wonder if he told Maria that she could not have chosen a better man of whom to ask help and advice; and though he knew what that advice would be, and felt sorrowfully sure that she would try to follow it, he almost smiled at the coincidence as he watched her cross the nave in the direction of the Sacristy.

And now, when she came back into the Basilica, she retraced her steps towards the tomb of Leo Twelfth. Again she stopped a moment and almost knelt as she passed before the Julian Chapel and went on to the north aisle; but when the small gate before which she had knelt with Castiglione was in sight she paused in

the shadow of the pillar and leant against the marble, as if she were very tired.

Till then she had not dared to ask herself what she meant to do, but when she saw the place where she had so lately touched Castiglione's hand in forgiveness of the past, the truth rushed back upon her, as the winter's tide turns from the ebb to storm upon the beaten shore.

It was upon her, and she felt that it would sweep her from her feet and drown her; and it was not the imaged truth she had taught herself to believe those many years. She gazed at the closed gate, and she knew why she had forgiven her lover at last. It was because she wished to forgive herself, and she had found it easy, shamefully easy. The hour of evil came back to her memory with frightful vividness, and now her pale cheek burned with shame and she pressed it hard against the icy marble; and she forced her eyes to stay wide open, lest if she shut them for an instant, she should see what she remembered so horribly well.

She would not go to the gate again, now; the words she had said there had been false and untrue, the prayer she had breathed there had been a blasphemy and nothing else. For years and years she had lived in the mortal sin of those brief moments; unconfessing and unpardoned of God, she had gone to Communion month after month, telling herself that she was an innocent, suffering woman, doing her best to atone for another's crime; yet she had always felt in the dark hiding-places of her heart the knowledge that it was all untrue, that she had been less sinned against than herself sinning,

and that if she would die in the faith in which she had been brought up, and in the hope of life hereafter, she must some day humble herself and her pride to the earth, and ask of God and man the pardon she had granted just now as if it were hers to give.

It was too much; it was more than she could bear. In her anger and hatred of herself she found strength to turn from the pillar and to go on straight and quickly to the door. Two or three soldiers who had wandered in were just leaving the Basilica; they lifted the heavy curtain for her and she thanked them mechanically and passed out, holding her head high.

CHAPTER IV

Maria hardly knew how she had come home. She had no distinct recollection of having taken a cab, nor of having driven through the city, nor of having paid a cabman when she reached the Via San Martino. There are times when unconscious cerebration is quite enough for the ordinary needs of life. Maria neither fainted nor behaved in any unusual way during the half-hour that elapsed between her leaving the pillar against which she had leant in the church and the moment when she entered her own room. Even then she hardly knew that she gave her maid her hat and gloves and smoothed her hair before she went to her sitting-room to be alone.

But when she was there, in her favourite seat with her little table full of books beside her, her footstool at her feet and her head resting at last against a small silk cushion on the back of the chair — then the one thought that had taken possession of her pronounced itself aloud in the quiet room.

'I have been a very wicked woman.'

That was all, and she said it aloud only once; but the words went on repeating themselves again and again in her brain, while she leaned back and stared steadily at the blank of the tinted ceiling; and for a time she turned

her head wearily from side to side on the cushion, as people do who have little hope, and fear that the very worst is close at hand.

For many years she had sustained a part which her pride had invented to quiet her conscience. If it were not so, if she had really been the outraged victim of a moment's madness, knowing herself quite innocent, why had she not gone to her husband, as an honest woman should, to ask for protection and to demand justice? Because she loved Castiglione still, perhaps; because she was willing to sacrifice everything rather than accuse him; because she would rather be dishonoured in her husband's eyes than see her lover disgraced before the world. But that was not true; that was impossible. If Baldassare del Castiglione had been the wretch she had the courage to tell him he was when she bade him leave her for ever, Maria Montalto would not have hesitated an instant. He should have gone where justice sends such men, and she would have asked her husband to let her end her days out of the sight of the world she had known.

Her memory brought back the words she had spoken to Castiglione long ago under the ilex-trees in the Villa Borghese. She remembered the intonations of her own voice, she remembered how she had quivered with pain and anger while she spoke, how she had turned and left him there, leaning against a tree, very pale; for she had made him believe all she said, and that was the worst a woman can say. She had called him a coward and a brute, the basest of mankind; and he had

obeyed her, and had left Rome that night because she had made him believe her.

But later, many months later, when Montalto solemnly accused her of having betrayed him, she had bent her head, and not one word of self-defence had risen to her lips; so her husband had turned away and left her, as she had turned and left her lover. He had been under the same roof with her after that, at more and more distant intervals till he had left Rome altogether; but never again, when they had been alone together, had he spoken one word to her except for necessity. Yet he had loved her then, and he loved her still; she had seen in his face that he was broken-hearted, and Monsignor Saracinesca had told her now that the deep hurt would not heal. She had played her comedy of innocence to her lover and to herself, but she had not dared to play it to her husband, lest some act of frightful injustice should be done to Baldassare del Castiglione.

She had forgiven Balduccio! She laughed at the thought now in bitter self-contempt. Her soul and her conscience had met face to face in the storm, and the expiation had begun. She must confess her fault to God and man, but first to man, first to that man to whom it would be most hard to tell the truth because she had been the most unjust to him, to Castiglione himself.

That was to be the answer to his question. There was no doubt now; he must go away. She could not allow him to exchange again into another regiment, in order that he might live near her for a time, nor could

she let him leave the service altogether, to pass an idle life in Rome. Every word that Don Ippolito had spoken was unanswerable, and there was much more that he had not said. She might not be able to trust herself after all; after reconciliation, friendship would come, cool, smiling and self-satisfied, but behind friendship there was a love that neither could hide long, and beyond love there was human passion, strong and wakeful, with burning eyes and restless hands, waiting till the devil opportunity should come suddenly and spread his dusky wings as a tent and a shelter for sin. Maria was still brave enough to fear that, and something told her that fear of herself must be the first step on which to rise above herself.

She left her seat at last and sat down at a table to write to Castiglione; but when she tried to word a note it was not easy. It would not be wise, either, for such words as she wished to send him are better not written down. Maria realised this before she had penned three lines, and she tore the bit of paper to shreds at once. Baldassare was stopping with cousins, and a note might fall into light-fingered hands.

She rang the bell and told Agostino to telephone to the Conte del Castiglione saying that she would be glad to see him the next day at half-past two, if he could come then. In a few moments the servant brought back the answer. The Conte had been at the telephone himself and would do himself the honour of calling on the Signora Contessa on the morrow at half-past two.

The formal reply was so like his messages of old days

that it sent a little thrill through her. Often and often he had come at that quiet hour, when Montalto was always out of the way, and each time he had found some new way of telling her that he loved her; and she, in turn, had listened and had laughingly scolded him, telling him that she had grown from a silly girl into a grave Roman matron, and would have no more of his boyish love-making; and, moreover, that if he was always going to make love to her she would refuse to receive him the very next time he tried to see her at the hour when she was alone. And yet she listened to his voice, and he saw her lip quiver sometimes and her soft pallor grow warmer; and always, when he sent a message asking to see her at half-past two, the answer had been that she would probably be at home, and that he might try if he liked; and when he came, she was there, and alone, and ready to laugh, and scold, and listen, expecting no danger and not wittingly thinking any evil.

So his message to-day startled her senses, as a little accidental pressure on the scar of an old wound sometimes sends a wave of the forgotten pain through the injured nerve. It was like a warning.

When she was alone she sat down in the deep chair again and leaned back. It was wrong to be so glad that she was to see him the next day, but she could not help it; and besides, it was to be the last time for so long, perhaps for ever. Surely, after all that she had suffered, she might allow herself that little joy before the unending separation began!

She was already far from the bitter self-reproach of a few minutes ago, and the mere thought of his coming had wrought the change. Was it not in order to be just to him at last that she had sent for him? Might there not be a legitimate moral satisfaction in humbling herself before him, and in the thought that she was about to lift a heavy burden from his heart? Moreover, to be for ever gloomily pondering on her past fault, now that she had acknowledged it and was sorry for it, would surely be morbid.

As for the religious side of the matter, she would make her peace with heaven at once. She would put on a brown veil and go to the Capuchin church that very afternoon and confess all to Padre Bonaventura, of whom she had so often heard, but who would never know who she was. He would impose some grave and wearisome penance, no doubt; Capuchin monks are notably more severe in that respect than other confessors. He would perhaps bid her read the seven penitential psalms seven times, which would be a long affair. But he could not refuse her absolution since she was really so sorry; and the next morning she would get up early and go to the little oratory near by and receive the Communion in the spirit of truth at last; and when Castiglione came at half-past two she would have grace and strength to tell what she had to tell, and to bid him good-bye, even for ever. If she did all this she would earn the right to that one last little joy of meeting.

She was not a saint yet; she was not even heroic, and

perhaps what she took for a guiding ray of light was anything but that; perhaps it was little better than a will-o'-the-wisp that would lead her into far more dangerous ground than she had traversed yet. But after her resolution was made she felt lighter and happier, and better able to face the world than she had felt during that long week since Castiglione had come back.

Then Leone came in, straight and sturdy and bright-eyed; and he marched across the room to where she sat and threw his arms around her, as he sometimes did. And though he was but a small boy, she felt how strong he was when he squeezed her to him with all his might and kissed her, first on one cheek and then on the other; and in spite of herself she closed her eyes for a second and drew one short breath as she kissed him too. He was very quick to see and notice everything.

'Did I hurt you, mama?' he asked almost anxiously.

'No, dear!' She smiled. 'You are not strong enough to hurt me yet, darling.'

He drew back half a step and surveyed his mother critically, with his head a little on one side.

'I wouldn't, of course,' he said condescendingly. 'But if I twisted your arm and hammered it with my fist I could hurt you. I did it to Mario Campodonico, and he's nine, and he howled.'

'Naughty boy!' Maria could not help laughing. 'Why did you hurt poor Mario?'

'Poor Mario!' cried Leone scornfully. 'He's twice my size, and he's learning to ride. Why shouldn't I hammer him if I can? He tried to take away a roast

chestnut I was eating. It was in the Villa Borghese only yesterday. He won't do it again, though! He howled.'

Thereupon Leone faced about, marched to the window, and climbed upon his favourite chair to look for soldiers in the street. He got up with three quick movements, as if he were going through a gymnastic exercise. He set one knee and both hands on the seat, then put the second knee up and both hands on the top of the chair, then he straightened his back and was in position. Maria watched him, and her eyes settled on the back of his solid little neck that showed above the broad sailor's collar, and on the short and thick brown hair that was so curly just at that place.

But presently she turned away and mechanically took a book from the low table beside her. Don Ippolito had said that Montalto might offer her a reconciliation she did not deserve, and might come back to take her and Leone to live in the palace again. The thought chilled her and frightened her, for she could guess at his expression when he should first see what she had seen every hour of the day for years. Yet any father might be proud of such a child — any father! Could such a 'reconciliation' be lasting?

That afternoon she took Leone with her and drove out by Porta Furba to the ruins which the people call Roma Vecchia. They drove across the great meadow, and when they could drive no farther they got out and walked, and climbed up till they could sit on one of the big fragments of masonry and look towards the west.

Leone had been rather silent, for with the exception of an occasional couple of mounted carabineers on patrol they had hardly met any soldiers at all. And now they sat side by side in the sunshine, for there was a cool breeze blowing from the sea and the air was not warm yet.

Leone took no interest in any pastimes earlier than the age of armour and tournaments; and Maria was glad that he did not ask her questions about the ruins, for she could not have answered him. She knew nothing about the Quintilii and very little about Commodus. She only knew that the great pile was commonly called the 'Old Rome,' and that she loved it for its grand loneliness. But Leone looked about him, and thought it was a good place for a castle. Next to soldiers he loved castles and forts.

'If this belonged to me, I'd build a fortress here,' he observed gravely, after a long silence. 'I'd build a great castle like Bracciano.' He had been taken there on a children's picnic during the winter. 'But I'd have lots of guns and a regiment of artillery here if it were mine,' he added.

'What for?' asked Maria, amused.

'To defend Rome, of course,' answered Leone.

'But no one is coming to take Rome, child,' objected his mother.

'Oh, yes, they may!' He seemed quite confident. 'If there are no other enemies, there are always the French and the priests!'

At this astounding view of Italy's situation Maria could not help laughing.

'We are good friends with the French now,' she said. 'And who has been telling you that the priests are the enemies of Italy?'

'Gianluca Trasmondo says so,' answered Leone. 'He knows, for his uncle is a cardinal. Besides, no priests are soldiers, are they? So they wouldn't defend Italy. So they're Italy's enemies.'

'You are wrong, darling,' answered Maria. 'The priests have all had to do their military service first.'

'What? And wear uniforms, and go to drill, and smoke Toscano cigars?'

'I'm not sure about the smoking,' laughed Maria; 'but they have to serve their time in the army, just like other men.'

'Of course you know,' said the small boy, who had perfect confidence in his mother's facts. 'I didn't. I'll tell Gianluca to-morrow. All the same, this would be a good place for a castle. I wonder whose the fields are.'

'I don't know, dear. You may run down to the carriage and ask Telemaco if you like, and then come back and tell me. He knows all about the Campagna.'

Telemaco was Maria's coachman, who had followed her when she had left the Montalto palace — a grey-haired, placid, corpulent man of great weight and overpowering respectability.

Leone jumped up and ran away at a steady trot, with his elbows well in, his fists close to his chest, and his head back, as he had seen soldiers run in drilling. Maria was left alone for a few minutes, for the carriage

was on the other side of the ruins and two hundred yards away. She leaned on one elbow and looked westward at the distant broken aqueduct, far away under the sun. She was thinking of what she should say to the old monk in the Capuchin church later in the afternoon, and the moments passed quickly. Before she had determined upon the opening sentence, the boy came trotting back to her up the little hill. He stopped just before her, his legs apart and his face beaming with pleasure.

'Well,' he said, 'what do you think? Shall I build a castle here or not?'

'I think not,' answered his mother, smiling.

'But I think I shall when I am big. It all belongs to me!'

Maria opened her eyes in surprise.

'To you, child? What do you mean?'

'I asked Telemaco whose this land was. He said, "It belongs to your most excellent house." I said just what you said — "What do you mean?" He said, "It is as I say, Signorino, for the land here belongs to his Excellency your papa, and if you see one of the mounted watchmen in blue about here, he will have the arms of your house on his badge." That was what Telemaco said. So you see, when I am big I shall build a castle here. Why do you look sorry, mama?'

'I'm not sorry, darling,' Maria answered with a faint smile. 'I was thinking of the time when you will be grown up.'

Leone reflected a little.

'But why should you look sorry for that, mama? You won't go away and leave me when I'm grown up, will you, to go and live with papa in Spain?'

'No, dear. I shall certainly not do that.'

Another pause, longer than the first, during which the small boy watched her face keenly, and she shrank a little before the fearless blue eyes.

'Why does papa never come back to see us?' he asked.

She had expected the question a long time, and had made up her mind how to meet it when it came; yet she was taken by surprise.

'Your father's mother is a great invalid,' she said, with a little nervous hesitation. 'He does not like to leave her.'

'He might come here for a day sometimes,' answered Leone, not at all satisfied. 'He doesn't like us. That's the reason. I know it is. He doesn't want us to live in the palace. That's why we live where we do.'

'Hush! You must not say that, my dear. The palace is very gloomy, and I chose to live in a more cheerful part of the city.'

'I like it better, too,' said the boy in a tone of reflection. 'But all other people live in their own palaces, all the same.'

'Most of our friends are many in a family, dear. But we are only you and I.'

A silence, during which the child's brain was weighing these matters in the balance.

'I'm glad papa never comes back,' he said at last. 'You are, too.'

Without waiting for an answer, and as if to give vent to his feelings, he turned away, picked up a small stone, and threw it as far as he could over the green grass below the ruins — presumably at an imaginary enemy of Italy. He watched it as it fell, and did not seem satisfied with his performance.

'I suppose David was bigger than I am when he killed the giant with a pebble,' he observed rather wistfully.

They drove home.

'Why didn't you know that the land out there belongs to us, mama?' asked Leone, after a long silence, when they were near the Porta San Giovanni.

'I know very little about the property, except that it is large and some of it is in the Campagna.'

'Why not?'

'Because no one ever told me about it,' Maria replied, feeling that she must find an answer. The boy looked at her gravely, but not incredulously, and asked nothing more.

CHAPTER V

The sun was sinking when Maria descended the long flight of steps from the door of the Capuchin church to the level of the street, and under the grey veil she wore her cheeks were wet with undried tears. But she held her head up proudly, and her small feet stepped firmly and lightly on the stones.

She was not in a state of grace by any means, and the tears had not been shed in repentance for her sins. She hardly ever cried, and when she did it was generally from anger and bitter disappointment. The moisture that had risen in her eyes that morning when Castiglione had offered to go away for her sake had not overflowed; but now, when she had left the confessional without the expected absolution, and had seen the hard-faced old monk in brown come out of his box and stalk stiffly away to the sacristy as if he had done something very virtuous, she had sat down in a chair in a corner of the empty church and the burning drops had streamed over her cheeks like fire till they reached the small handkerchief she held to her mouth under her veil; and she had bitten hard at the hem, and it was salt with her tears.

She had been misunderstood, she had been misjudged, she had been rebuked. She had been told that she was

a very great sinner; that so long as she was willing to love a man who was not her husband, and who had been her lover, God would not forgive her; that absolution came from God and not from priests, and that it was out of any priest's power to pronounce it while she was in her present state of mind; that she might come again when she was sure that she wished never to think of that evil man; that if she felt that she owed him reparation for having been unjust to him she should write to him to say so, asking him to destroy the letter, and bidding him never to come near her again; and that to see him again, even once, since she still loved him, would be not only a deadly risk but actually a mortal sin. After this she had been sternly told to go away, to pray for grace, and to be particularly careful to observe days of abstinence and fasting, as the devil was everywhere and never slept.

Now the monk who had heard her confession was a good man and meant well, and believed that he was speaking for the good of her soul. He knew well enough from the penitent's language and manner of speaking about her life that she was a lady of Rome, and perhaps one of the great ones who sometimes came to him because they did not like to go to their regular confessors. But this, in his estimation, was the best of reasons why Maria should be treated with the same severity as the poorest and most ignorant woman of the people. If she had come to him with a religious doubt or a scruple concerning dogma he would have treated her very differently, for he was something of a theologian and

had a monk's love of controversy. But she came to him simply as a woman, with a perfectly evident mortal sin on her conscience, and what he considered a perfectly evident desire to compromise things by pretending that her lover could be her friend. In such matters he was a ruthless democrat, as many confessors are. She might be a great lady, she might have been royal, for all he cared; what was just to one woman's soul and conscience was just to another woman's, all the world over, and where the deadly sins were concerned there was not to be any distinction between the poor and the rich, the educated and the ignorant. On the contrary, educated people should get less mercy, because they ought to know better than their inferiors, and because they had been brought up in surroundings where the baser sins of humanity are supposed to be less common; and finally and generally, because we are told that the salvation of the rich is to be regarded as a much more difficult matter than that of the poor. It was certainly not the business of a Capuchin monk to reverse matters and make it easier.

But the delicately nurtured, sorely tried woman who had come to unburden her conscience of a sin she had only fully understood within the last few days, felt as if the well-meaning monk had thrust out his bony hand from the shadow of the confessional and had deliberately slapped her cheek.

Therefore Maria Montalto was not in a state of grace, and in her mortification she called the austere and democratic Capuchin several hard names; she said to

herself that he was ignorant, that he was a common person, and that it was a scandal that such a prejudiced man should be a licensed confessor. She bit her handkerchief hard, tasting the salt of her tears in the hem of it, because she knew in her heart that there was a little truth in some of the hard things she had been told.

Her pride and nervous energy came to the rescue after a while, and she left the church to walk home through quiet streets where no one was likely to meet her. The evening breeze would dry her face under her veil, and her anger would help the drying process too, for it kept her cheeks hot. That morning she had felt very ill and tired and had vaguely expected to break down, but the afternoon in the Campagna had done her good, and her temper did the rest. Castiglione would find her looking wonderfully well when he came the next day at half-past two.

The sun had set, but it was still broad daylight when she reached the top of the Via San Basilio. She turned to the right presently, and almost ran into Teresa Crescenzi, who was walking very fast and also wore a veil, but was always an unmistakable figure anywhere.

'Maria!' cried the lively lady at once. 'Where in the world are you going alone on foot at this hour?'

'I have been to confession and I'm going home,' answered Maria without hesitation, and smiling at the other's quickness in asking a question which might certainly have been asked of her with equal reason.

'So have I,' answered Teresa with alacrity. 'What a coincidence!'

But she had not been to confession.

'Good-bye, dear!' she added almost at once, and with a quick and friendly nod she went on down the hill.

Teresa had not gone far when she turned into a deserted side street and saw Baldassare del Castiglione walking at a leisurely pace a little way in front of her. A much less ready gossip than she might well have thought it probable that he and Maria Montalto had just parted, after taking a harmless little walk together in a very quiet part of the town.

It was certainly Castiglione whom she saw. There was no mistaking his square shoulders and back of his strong neck, where the closely cropped brown hair had an incorrigible tendency to be curly. Teresa had often noticed that, for she admired him and wished that he were a more eligible husband; but she was not very rich, and he was distinctly poor. She often saw him in the summer, and it had not occurred to her till his return to Rome that he would refuse her if she suggested that he might marry her. That was the way she put it, for a lack of practical directness was not among her defects. She had supposed that he had really quite forgotten Maria by this time, although her pretty tale about them was founded on the undying and perfectly innocent affection of both.

Now before she overtook Castiglione, as she inevitably must if he did not mend his pace, she hesitated whether she should turn back quietly and take another street. For she had not been to confession. Then it seemed to her that it would be dangerous to avoid him, for he

was walking slowly, as if he himself were only keeping out of the way in the side street for a while, and might turn back at any moment; and if he did, he would recognise her. So she decided to overtake him and ask him to walk with her till they could find a closed cab, which was what she wanted.

Having reached this decision a further consideration presented itself to her mind. He would hardly believe that she could be coming up behind him without having met Maria, who had certainly been with him and whom she had just left. He would not like to feel that this had happened, and that she might even have seen them together. It would be more tactful to be frank.

She spoke as soon as she was close to him.

'Good evening, Balduccio,' she said pleasantly. 'Will you help me to find a closed cab?'

He took off his hat without showing any surprise, and smiled as if not at all disturbed by the meeting. But then, thought Teresa, he always had good nerves and was a man of the world.

'We can get one at the Piazza Barberini,' he said, lengthening his stride to keep up with her, for he saw that she was in a hurry.

'Can we? I feel one of my chills coming on, and I must either run to keep warm or get a closed carriage somewhere. Do you mind walking fast?'

'Not at all.'

'Because you were walking very slowly when I saw you.'

'Was I?' He seemed very vague about it.

'Yes!' she laughed. 'Dear old Balduccio! You are just the same reserved, formal silly old thing you were when we went to the dancing-class at Campodonico's, ever so long ago!'

'Am I?'

'Yes. But as I just happened to meet Maria, you need not pretend to be vague. You know how frank I am, so I'm sure you would rather be sure at once that I know, and that I will not tell any one!'

'Dear friend,' returned Castiglione blandly, 'what in the world are you talking about?'

Again Teresa laughed gaily.

'Always the same! But as I met Maria Montalto only a moment ago, it's not of the slightest use to tell me that you two have not been for a little walk together! Do you think I blame you? Haven't you behaved like a couple of saints for more years than I like to remember? No one can find any fault with you, of course, but for Heaven's sake walk in the Corso, or in the Via Nazionale, where every one can see you, instead of in such a place as this!'

'But I have not met the Countess at all,' answered Castiglione with some annoyance, when she paused at last to take breath.

'Oh! Oh! Oh!' she cried, shaking her finger at him. 'It's very wrong to tell fibs to an old friend who only wishes to help you!'

'You may think what you please,' he answered bluntly. 'I have not met the Countess this afternoon. I have been to see a sculptor who has his studio in this street.'

'Oh, yes!' cried Teresa incredulously. 'And Maria told me she had been to confession.'

'If she said so, it is true. If we had met we should have stopped to speak. We might have walked a little way together. But we have not met.'

Teresa Crescenzi did not believe him. She had managed to get rid of her veil while walking, and without being noticed by him. Women can do such things easily when a man is very much preoccupied about other matters.

'As you like,' she answered, and her tone was anything but complimentary to his truthfulness.

But he did not take up the question after having once told her the truth, and when he opened the door of the cab they found in the Piazza Barberini there was a distinct coolness in their leave-taking. He gave the cabman her address and went away on foot down the crowded Tritone towards the city. When he had walked a quarter of an hour he looked at his watch, stopped a policeman, and asked for the nearest public telephone office.

He called for Maria Montalto's number and was answered by Agostino, the butler. He inquired whether the Countess would speak with him herself, and presently he heard her voice.

'I am Castiglione,' he said. 'Is it true that Teresa Crescenzi met you in the Via di San Basilio when you were walking home from confession half an hour ago?'

'Yes — but how ——'

He interrupted her at once.

'I am in a public office, shut up in the box, but be careful what you say unless you are alone. I met Teresa a moment after she had spoken to you, and she pretended to know that we had been together in one of those quiet streets.'

'How abominable!'

'I had been to see Farini, the sculptor, close by San Nicolo. It was natural that Teresa should suppose we had met, but I was angry, and so was she because I denied what she said. I'm afraid she will repeat the story.'

'Why should I care?' Maria's voice was rather sharp.

'I care, on your account, so I have warned you.'

'Thank you. You will come to-morrow?'

'To-morrow, at half-past two, if you will receive me. Good-bye.'

'You shall have the answer then. Good-bye.'

Maria went back to Leone, who was having his supper. The child was unusually silent, and ate with the steady, solemn appetite of strong boys. When he had finished he got up and gravely examined his armoury before going to bed, to see that his weapons were all clean and neatly hung in their places. There were two toy guns, with a tin revolver, a sword-bayonet, and a sabre. He went through this inspection every evening, and Maria sat by the table watching him while Agostino took away the things.

When the servant was gone the boy came and stood beside his mother's knee and looked up into her face earnestly.

'I'm sorry,' he said, after a long time.

'For what, dear?'

'You've been crying because I asked questions about papa. I'm sorry.'

She leant forward and took him in her arms quietly, and made him sit astride of her knees and look into her eyes while she held him by the wrists.

'Little man,' she said gently, 'if you ever say anything that hurts me I promise to tell you just what it is, because I know you will never mean to hurt me, even when you are grown up. It was nothing you said that made me cry this afternoon, so there's nothing for you to be sorry for —' she smiled and shook her head — 'nothing, darling, nothing, nothing!'

Leone smiled too.

'I'm glad,' he said, and then his face grew grave and thoughtful again.

Maria wondered what was going on in his small head during the next few seconds. When he spoke at last she started.

'Then it was the priest?' he said with conviction. 'I hate him.'

'What do you mean, child?'

'After we came home you put on the grey veil and went out alone. That is always confession, isn't it? When you came home you put up the veil and kissed me. Your cheeks were just a little wet still. So it was the priest, wasn't it, who made you cry?'

Maria would not deny the truth.

'It was something the confessor said to me,' she answered.

'I told you so!' returned the small boy. 'I hate him!'

He was well aware that if he stayed another moment where he was his mother would tell him that it was very wrong to hate anybody, so he struggled out of her hold, slipped from her knees to the floor, knelt down and began to say his small evening prayer with such amazing alacrity that Maria's breath was taken away and she could not get in a word of rebuke; in spite of herself she smiled over his bent head and felt very irreverently inclined to laugh at his manœuvre. But before he had finished her face was very grave, and when he got up from his knees she spoke to him before she kissed his forehead.

'Listen to me, my boy,' she said. 'You know that I always tell you the truth, don't you?'

'Yes,' answered Leone. 'So do I. It's cowardly to tell lies. Mario Campodonico is a coward, and he lies like anything.'

'Never mind Mario. I don't want you to say that you hate priests.'

'It's the truth,' retorted the terrible child. 'Shall I say I love them?'

'No. Listen to me. There are good people and bad people all over the world. So there are good and bad priests, but I think there are many more good ones than bad ones. You would not hate a good priest, would you?'

'N—no,' answered Leone, rather doubtfully.

'Then leave the bad ones to take care of themselves,

and don't think about them. Do you suppose I hate you when you are naughty and break things in a rage and try to beat the servants? It's the naughtiness I hate. It's not you.'

'It feels just the same,' observed the small boy, with great logic.

'But it's not,' answered his mother, trying to keep from laughing. 'And when you are bigger you will understand that one should not hate bad men, but the badness in them.'

'Well, that's better than nothing! Then I hate the badness in your priest, who made you cry, and I'd like to hammer it out of him!'

Maria was at the end of her arguments.

'He meant well,' she said weakly. 'I'm sure he meant well.'

'When he made you cry?' retorted Leone indignantly. 'You might just as well say I mean well when ——'

But at this point Maria closed the discussion abruptly by picking him up with a laugh and a kiss and carrying him off to bed. It was as much as she could do now, for he was very sturdy and heavy for his age.

CHAPTER VI

When Castiglione came on the following afternoon Maria was looking wonderfully well, and so like herself, as she had been within the first year of her marriage, that he could not help looking at her very hard. There was only the small patch of white in her dark hair near the left temple, which Castiglione could not remember; and there was the black frock. She always wore black or grey now, but when she was very young she had liked pretty colours.

Castiglione himself was in uniform, for he thought it possible that he might see Leone, and he would not have broken his promise to the boy for anything. He was not the man to put on his uniform with the idea of looking better in it than in a civilian's clothes, still less had he any thought of recalling old memories to Maria by such theatrical means. Men who are hard hitters are rarely theatrical in small things, though some famous generals, like Napoleon, have been great dramatic artists.

In Italy the uniforms of the cavalry regiments do not differ as much as in some other countries, and but for the colour of the facings and a few smaller details Castiglione's dress was enough like the uniform of the Piedmont Lancers to produce a much deeper impression

on Maria than he could have easily understood. The man himself had changed little. He was a little broader perhaps, his strong features were a little more marked, his military moustache was heavier, but that was all. At thirty, or nearly that, he was much the same active, energetic, good-looking young officer he had been at two and twenty.

They instinctively took the places they had sat in during his first visit. The hour was the same, the light in the room was the same, too; but other things were not the same. Castiglione felt it as soon as he saw Maria's face, and she knew it when she heard the sound of his voice. The ice-wall that had stood between them so long had melted away; the chasm that separated Maria even from that barrier was bridged. It would not be easy now to touch hands and part again for years.

The stern old monk's words echoed faintly in Maria's heart: to meet thus was a deadly risk, perhaps a mortal sin. But the voice was far away, and Maria was very happy and hopeful, and the old Capuchin had been a common and ignorant man who could not understand the pride and self-respect of a Roman lady, nor the generous honour of such a man as Baldassare del Castiglione.

'I was right to telephone last night, was I not?' he asked when they were seated.

'Yes, quite right. But Teresa has always seemed to be a good friend. She may have been annoyed because she had made such a stupid mistake, but I really don't think she will gossip about us.'

'I hope not, though I don't trust her.'

After this there was a little silence, for he would not make conversation; and while he waited for Maria to speak, his eyes were satisfied, and his heart beat quietly and happily because he was near her. He did not feel the heavy, passionate pulse that used to throb in his neck when he came near her, nor the dryness in his throat, with the strange, cool quivering of his own lips. He was simply and quietly happy, and he trusted himself and her.

'You have come for your answer,' she said, after a long time. 'It's of no use to pretend that we have anything else to talk of. We will be honest with each other. There is no one to hear what we say, and we have nothing to say now of which we need be ashamed before God.'

Castiglione silently bent his head in assent and waited.

'The forgiveness you asked of me yesterday, I should have asked of you, too,' Maria went on, but her eyes looked down. 'I ask it now, before I say anything more.'

'I don't understand,' answered the man. 'How can I have anything to forgive?'

'Balduccio, do you remember the hard words I said to you under the ilex-trees when we parted?'

'A condemned man does not forget the words of his sentence.' His voice was dull.

'I called you a coward and a brute, Balduccio, and I called you the basest of mankind.'

'It was your right.'

'No. It was not. I take back those words. I ask your pardon for them.'

'What?' His voice rang in the room, hoarse and strong.

'I take back every word. I was the coward. I made myself believe what I said, and I knew you would believe it too. I have been a very wicked woman all these years, Balduccio. I have been wickedly unjust to you. You must try to forgive me.'

Her voice had sunk very low, for it had been hard to say; but his almost broke in his throat.

'Try? Ah, Maria ——'

He moved quickly to come near her, and she was aware of it. Still looking down, she stretched out her hand against him.

'Sit still!' she said. 'Say that you forgive me, if you can.'

'With all my soul,' he answered, drawing back into his chair, obedient to her gesture.

'Thank you,' she said, so low that he could hardly hear her.

With that she leaned far back in her low chair and pressed her fingers upon her eyes without covering her face, and he saw the warmth come and go in her soft pale cheeks, and then come back again. Indeed, it had not been easy for her. Presently she opened her eyes, and folded her hands on her lap, and gazed happily into his face.

'I can look at you now,' she said simply, 'and it is not wrong.'

'No, indeed!'

But he did not know what he was saying, nor what

he should say, for in a moment she had changed all the greater thoughts of his life. She had taken from him the burden of the old accusation which she had made him believe was just in spite of himself; but it was like lifting heavy weights from a balance very suddenly; the whole mechanism of his mind and conscience quivered and trembled when the strain was gone, and swung violently this way and that.

Presently she was speaking again, and he began to hear and understand.

'I am not going to pretend anything,' she was saying. 'But I will not hide anything either. No, I will not! There is nothing to be ashamed of now, because we have made up our minds that there never shall be again. We promise each other that, don't we, Balduccio?'

'I promise you that, come what may,' he answered, well knowing what he said now.

'And I promise the same, come what may,' she said. 'I give you my word of honour.'

'You have mine, Maria.'

'That is enough, and God believes us,' she said gravely. 'But now the truth, and nothing else. We are not going to pretend that we are like brother and sister. We love each other dearly, and we love as man and woman, and I am sure we always shall, now and for ever, in life, and beyond death, and in the life to come. I am very sure of that.'

He bent his head and nodded slowly, but that was not enough for her.

'Are you not sure, Balduccio?' she asked after a moment.

He looked up suddenly with blazing eyes.

'I love you now,' he said. 'I have loved you all my life. That is what I know. If there is a God, He knows it, for He made it so, and it will be so for ever. If not, it will end when we are both dead, but not before.'

'It will never end,' Maria answered. 'But it must not be a weight to drag us down, it must be a strength to lift us. It shall be! Say that it shall be!'

'I will do what I can.'

'Balduccio,' she went on earnestly, 'it has lifted us already. It has made you live a better life than other men, though you do not believe in God. And though it made me a coward for a long time, it has given me strength to be brave at last, now that we have met again, strength to tell you the truth, strength to ask your forgiveness! If it has done all that already, what will it not do hereafter, if we keep our promise?'

The deep and fearless light was in her dark eyes now, and she spoke in a heavenly inspiration of purity and peace. Castiglione watched her with a sort of awe which he had never felt in his life. That was a brave, high instinct in him that answered her call; it was the instinct that would have responded if he had been chosen to lead the forlorn hope in a fight all but lost.

'You are a saint,' he said. 'I am not. But I will try to follow if you will only lead the way.'

'No, dear, I am no saint,' she answered.

He started at the loving word she had scarcely ever used with him, and she saw his movement and understood.

'Why not?' she asked. 'It is the truth, and we are not the less safe for saying that we love, now that we have promised. No, I am not a saint. You have been better than I in all these years, for I have been unjust to you, but you have borne it patiently and you have loved me still. That is what I mean when I say that our love can lift us up. Do you see? Only — we must not forget the others ——'

She paused.

'Montalto,' said Castiglione gravely. 'I understand.'

'My husband and my son,' Maria said. 'We owe them a terrible debt.'

Castiglione's eyes softened.

'It is for their sakes that we have promised,' she went on. 'For their sakes there must never again be any earthly taint upon our love, dear.'

Once more the tender word touched him. He passed his hand over his eyes as if to hide something.

'If you were only free!' he sighed.

Maria made a little movement.

'The very thought of that is wrong,' she answered bravely. 'You must not think of it, you must never say it.'

'I wish your husband no ill,' Castiglione answered, in a sterner tone than she had heard yet. 'I did him a great injury. I would make reparation if I knew how. But I am a man, Maria, a man like any other,

and I love you in a man's way, and if Montalto died I should want you for my wife, as you should be. We have promised that between us there shall be no word or thought of which we need be ashamed, even before your husband, if he were here; but more than that I will not promise, and that is already as much as any man could keep.'

Maria shook her head gravely and waited a moment before she answered.

'I should owe myself to his memory if he were dead,' she said at last. 'A lifetime of faithfulness, cost what it may, is not enough to expiate what I did.'

Castiglione judged her as men judge the women they love, and he knew that for the present it was useless to oppose her. He folded his hands and listened, and she did not see that his fingers strained upon each other; nor could she guess that his heart was not beating as quietly now as when he had sat down opposite her a little while ago.

'That is the one condition on which we can see each other,' she went on. 'There must be no thought of any earthly union — ever! If you feel that you are strong enough for that, Balduccio, then come back to Rome as soon as you can. If you can exchange into your old regiment again, do so. If not, come now and then, when you can get leave. We may see each other once a week, at least once a week! The world cannot blame us for that, after all these years. It will be little enough, once a week! And sometimes, perhaps, we might meet in some gallery, in some quiet museum where only the

foreigners go, and we could walk about and talk, and the world will never know it.'

Castiglione smiled at her innocent ignorance of lovers' tricks, for he was quieter now, and very happy at the thought of seeing her often. It would never have occurred to him to do the foolish thing of which Teresa Crescenzi had suspected him on the previous afternoon.

'The great matter is that I am to see you,' he said; 'that the separation is over, and that we love each other!'

'That — yes! Oh, that above and beyond all things, and for ever and ever.'

The lovelight was in her eyes as she gazed at him, and her parted lips were delicately beautiful. Again his hands pressed one another very hard, and he felt that he set his teeth. He suddenly wondered how long he could keep his promise, and by what manner of death he would choose to end his life when he felt that he was going to break it. She was putting upon him a heavier trial and a far harder expiation than she knew. Her eyes were so dark and tender, her parted lips were so sweet to see! In her reliance on herself and him she had already loosened the great restraint that had bound her since the evil hour; she cared not to hide the outward looks of love. She even longed to see in his eyes what she felt in her own.

'You love me less than I love you, dear,' she said softly. 'You are less happy than I am, because we are to meet often!'

Without a word Castiglione rose from his seat and

went to the window at the further end of the room, and stood there, looking down through the slits of the blinds. Maria half understood, and sighed.

'Forgive me,' she said, rather sorrowfully.

'I'm only a man, Maria,' he answered, turning his head. 'You must not make it too hard for me. I love you in a man's way, and you have made me promise to love you in yours. I must learn, before I can be sure of myself.'

Maria reflected a moment. Her thoughts were full of an ideal sacrifice.

'Balduccio!' She called to him gently, for he was looking down at the street again. 'Shall I give you back your word and tell you to go away for a long time, if it's going to be so hard for you?'

'No!'

The single syllable was rough and strong, for he resented what she had said. She rose too and went to him at the window.

'Are you angry with me?' she asked humbly.

His hand grasped her bare wrist and tightened upon it almost as if he meant to hurt her, and he spoke in short, harsh sentences.

'No, I am not angry. I love you too much. You don't understand what I feel. How should you? I've been as faithful to you as you've been to your husband all these years. And now I'm with you, and we are alone, and we love each other, and I'm nothing but a man after all — and if you look at me in the old way I shall go mad or kill you.'

He drew her wrist roughly to him and kissed her

hand once, roughly, and dropped it. He had done that in the old days too, and Maria saw it all again in a violent flash, as men see danger ahead in a storm at night, lit up by quivering lightning.

She drew breath sharply and turned away from him. She leaned upon the mantelpiece and rested her throbbing forehead upon her hands.

'Oh, why have we these earthly bodies of ours?' she moaned. 'Why? why? Why could not God have made us like the angels?'

'Why not, indeed!' echoed Castiglione, in bitter unbelief.

'Even like the fallen angels!' she cried desperately. 'They fell by pride, but not by this! Are there not temptations for heart and soul and mind enough to try us, to raise us up if we overcome, to damn us if we yield? Enough to send us to hell or heaven — without this? O God, that what Thou hast made in Thine own image should be so vile, so vile, so vile!'

Her despair was real; her cry came from an almost breaking heart. Castiglione came to her now and laid his hand gently upon her shoulder.

'Maria! Look at me, dear! Don't be afraid!'

She raised her head timidly from her hands and turned her eyes slowly to him, more than half afraid. But when she saw that his own were calm and grave again, she gave one little cry of relief and buried her face upon his shoulder, clinging to him with both hands; and her touch did not stir his pulse now.

'No, I'm not afraid of you!' she softly cried. 'It

was only a moment, dear, only one dreadful moment, for I trust you with myself as I would trust you with my soul! Sometimes —' she looked up lovingly to his face — 'sometimes each of us must be brave for both, you know. As we are now, you might even kiss me once and I should fear nothing!'

He smiled and bent down and kissed her cheek; and there was no thought in him that he would not have told her. But then he gently took her hands from his shoulder and made her sit down as they had sat before.

'That was not wrong, was it?' she asked, with a happy smile.

'No,' he answered quietly, 'there was no wrong in that, neither to you nor to the others.'

'I'm glad,' she answered, 'so glad! But it would not be right to do it often.'

'No, not often. Not for a long time again.'

They were both silent in the ebbing of the tide which at the full had nearly swept them from their feet. At heart, in spite of all, there was something strangely innocent in them both. Castiglione's friends would have wondered much if they could have understood him, as some of the graver sort might. Few men of his age, beyond the cloister, knew less of women's ways and women's love than he; few soldiers, indeed, and surely not one of his brother officers. To wear the King's uniform ten years in the gayest and smartest cavalry regiment of the service is not a school for austere virtue or innocence of heart. All that Castiglione's comrades noticed was that he talked but little of women, who

were often the chief subject of the others' conversation, and that he was very reticent about the ones he knew. They respected him for that, on the whole, though they sometimes chaffed him a little in a friendly way. They all agreed among themselves that he had some secret and lasting attachment for a woman of their own class whose name he succeeded in keeping from them in spite of their repeated attempts to find it out. He was such a manly man that they liked him the better for it; the more, because great reticence was not their own chief quality. For the rest, though he was poorer than most of them, he was always ready to join in anything except a general raid on womankind. He played cards with them, and when he could lose no more, he said so; he was honest in matters of horseflesh and gave sound advice; he never shirked his duty and left it for another to do; he was good-natured in doing a comrade's work when he was asked to do it for any good reason; he was the best rider in the regiment, and he never talked about what he had done, or could do, with a horse; he was not over clever, but he was good company and told a story with a touch of humour; and he never borrowed from a brother officer, nor refused to lend, if he had any money. Altogether, he was the best comrade in the world and everybody liked and respected him, from the rather supercilious colonel, who was an authentic duke, and the crabbed old major, who had been wounded at Dogali, to the rawest recruit that was drafted in from a Sardinian village or a shepherd's hut in the Apennines.

But none of all those who liked and respected him guessed that in the arts of love he was considerably behind the youngest subaltern in the regiment, at least, so far as his own experience was concerned, for he could have written volumes about that of the rest as described by themselves. As a cadet, indeed, he had not been a model of austerity; but he had fallen in love with Maria a few days after he had received his commission, and such as he had been then he had remained ever since, except for her. If his colonel had known this, he would have smiled sarcastically and would have said that Castiglione was a case of arrested development, the old major would have stared at him stupidly without in the least comprehending that such a man could exist, and the rest of the mess would have roared with laughter and called him a crazy sentimentalist. But none of them knew the truth, and he had lived his life in his own way. There are not many men in the great world like Baldassare del Castiglione, but there are a few; and in the little world, in simple countries, there are more of them than the great world ever dreams of.

This long digression, if it be one, is to explain why Castiglione accepted Maria's strangely exalted plan for the future of both, instead of telling her quite frankly that the chances in favour of its success were too small for poor humanity to count upon, and that the best way was to part again and to meet very rarely or not at all, until the fire of life should be extinguished in the grey years, and they could look at each other without seeing so much as a spark of it left in each other's tired

eyes. That is what he would have done, as a man of honour, if he had known as many other women of his own class intimately as some of his comrades did. Or, if he had been like them in other things too, and had loved Maria less truly, he would have sat down to besiege the fortress he had once stormed, and would have gone to work scientifically to demolish its defences, making pretence of accepting the trusting woman's generous offer in order to outwit and conquer her by slow degrees. And if he had done either the one or the other, that is to say, if he had understood women's ways, this would either have been the story of a vulgar fault, or it would have ended abruptly with Castiglione's departure.

It is neither. Baldassare was innocent enough as well as honourable enough to believe that he and Maria could keep the promise they had made; and he loved her so dearly that the prospect of seeing her often was like a vision of heaven already half realised.

So on that day they began the new life together, trusting that they could live it faithfully to the end, but truly resolved to part again for ever if real danger came near them.

They believed in themselves and in each other. Maria had faith in a higher power from which she was to receive strength; Castiglione had little or nothing of this, but he said to himself plainly that if he broke his word he would die for it on the same day, and he loved mere life enough to think the forfeit a heavy one.

They counted upon themselves and upon each other.

There was nothing to suggest that quite external circumstances might influence their lives to make the task easier or more difficult than they anticipated. Most certainly neither believed that there could be moments ahead which would be harder to bear than those through which they had already lived.

When Castiglione went away that afternoon they had agreed that he should come again on the next day but one, and once again before he went back to Milan, and that he should at once take steps to exchange into the Piedmont Lancers, if possible, as his old regiment was likely to remain in Rome fully eighteen months longer.

CHAPTER VII

If Giuliana Parenzo had been one of those nervous, sensitive women who are always thinking about themselves and fancying that their friends are on the point of betraying them, she would have noticed a little change in Maria's manner after Castiglione's visit to Rome. It was not that Maria was at all less fond of her than before, or less affectionate, or apparently less glad to see her. It was much more subtle than that. There is a great difference between a hungry man and a man who merely has an appetite. The one must have food, the other is only pleased to have it. Giuliana's friendship had long been a necessity to Maria, but it now sank to the condition of being merely an added satisfaction in her life. Formerly she would not have given it up for anything else; but now, if she could have been forced to choose between Castiglione and Giuliana, she would have given up her friend.

The Marchesa, however, was not a sensitive or nervous woman, and she noticed nothing of the change that had taken place. She was therefore very much surprised when her husband spoke to her about Maria. It was late in the afternoon, some days after Castiglione had gone back to Milan, and Parenzo had come home tired from the Foreign Office and was smoking in his

wife's dressing-room, which was his favourite resort at that hour. Like many busy women, Giuliana had her writing-table there, in order to be safe from interruption, and she was occupied with some notes which had to be fininshed before dinner, while her husband sat in a low straw chair watching her, and devising a new costume for their approaching trip to England. He had always considered it his especial mission to superintend his wife's dress, and his taste was admirable. He was a small wiry man with a neat reddish beard, not much hair on the top of his head, and a single eyeglass. But he had an energetic nose and forehead, and a singularly pleasant smile.

Giuliana finished one of her notes and looked up, and instantly the smile came into his face, for he was quite as much in love with her as when he had married her. She looked pleased, and nodded to him before taking another sheet of paper.

'I wanted to ask you about Maria Montalto,' he said suddenly, arresting her attention.

Giuliana looked a little surprised, and laid down her pen.

'Yes, dear. What do you wish to know about her?'

'You are just as intimate with her as ever, are you not?' he inquired.

'Oh, yes! What could come between us? Why do you ask?'

'Because if you are as good friends as you always used to be, I think you had better tell her that people are talking about her. I like her, too, and it is a great

pity that anything disagreeable should be said, especially if there is no ground for it.'

'I'm sure there is none,' said Giuliana promptly. 'What is the gossip about her?'

'That she is seeing too much of Baldassare del Castiglione.'

'He is in Milan, my dear. How can she see much of him? What nonsense! Really, Mondo, you should not repeat such stuff to me! It's too absurd!'

Parenzo's first name was Sigismondo, of which Mondo is the diminutive. He shook his head quietly at his wife's rebuke.

'I know he is in Milan,' he answered. 'But he was here for a fortnight a while ago, and people are saying that they met every day. When he did not go to see her early in the afternoon, they met in quiet corners and walked together.'

'I suppose that by "people" you mean Teresa Crescenzi,' laughed Giuliana. 'She is the mother of all gossip, you know.'

'It was de Maurienne who told me,' rejoined Sigismondo.

'That's the same thing!' Giuliana laughed again.

'Oh, is it? I did not know. You don't say so!'

Parenzo seemed amused and interested. Monsieur de Maurienne was a second secretary of the French Embassy, a rich man with artistic tastes, who gave out that if he were ordered to any other post he would leave the service and continue to live in Rome.

'Teresa means to marry him,' Giuliana explained.

'I daresay she will. Of course, the story about Maria comes from her. There is not a word of truth in it. Castiglione is gone to Milan and may not come back for years.'

'My dear, I'm always ready to take your opinion in such matters. But this afternoon Casalmaggiore — you know who I mean?'

'The Colonel of Piedmont Lancers?'

'Yes. He dropped in to see me at the Foreign Office about a special passport for a friend of his, and he happened to say that Castiglione had asked to exchange back into his old regiment, and that the matter would certainly be arranged, as every one liked him so much. The Colonel was very curious to find out whether there was a lady in the case, and what her name might be. He seems to have plenty of curiosity, Casalmaggiore! I said I knew nothing about Castiglione's love affairs, and I did not refer him to Teresa Crescenzi, for he was the last man she tried to marry before de Maurienne! That was all.'

Giuliana looked at her husband gravely.

'I did not know that Castiglione wished to come to Rome,' she said. 'I doubt if Maria knows it, and I'm almost sure she will not be pleased.'

'I should not think she would,' answered Sigismondo Parenzo. 'And I'm quite sure that she won't like to have her name coupled with his. Go on with your notes, my darling. If you think it best to speak to her, do so. Whatever you do will be right.'

'I hope so, dear,' answered Giuliana rather vaguely.

Then she smiled at her husband again and went on writing.

Maria was very far from guessing that she was already so much talked of. She had lived so long in the pleasant security of a half-retirement from the world, and in the halo of semi-martyrdom created by Teresa Crescenzi's original story, that she fancied herself unwatched and her behaviour uncriticised. She would certainly never have thought of connecting any change in Teresa's disposition towards her with the fact that they had met in a lonely street after sunset, both wearing veils and telling each other that they had been to confession. She had not even taken the trouble to suspect that Teresa had not told the truth; still less had she guessed that Teresa was just then at a critical moment of her existence and was playing a very dangerous game in the hope of marrying Monsieur de Maurienne. Maria did not even know where he lived; and if she had ever bestowed a thought upon that, she would have supposed that he had rooms in the Embassy at the Palazzo Farnese.

She was too happy now to think about indifferent people. She had seen Baldassare twice again before he had left, and each time it had seemed easier and more delightful to be with him. He had behaved perfectly, and had shown that he was in earnest and meant to lead the ideal life of innocent and loving intercourse which she had planned for herself and him. Between their meetings she had written him long and eloquent letters, breathing peace, and hope, and an undying

love in a sphere far beyond this daily, earthly life. He had answered those letters by shorter ones that echoed them and promised all they asked. When he had come again he had stayed over an hour; when he came the last time he stayed almost all the afternoon, and Maria had boldly told Agostino that she was not at home for any one except the Marchesa di Parenzo. There was surely no harm in saying this, she thought, although she knew quite well that Giuliana and her husband were gone to Viterbo in a motor-car and would not return till late in the evening. She told herself that by some unforeseen accident they might come back sooner, and that Giuliana might appear about tea-time; and that it was therefore quite honest and truthful to tell Agostino that the Marchesa was to be admitted, if she came, well knowing that the chances were about ten thousand to one against anything so disagreeable. The improbable had happened twice lately — Maria had chanced to meet Castiglione at Saint Peter's, and Teresa had chanced to meet him just after meeting her. Those were two coincidences, both of which had produced more important results than might have been anticipated; but it was not likely that there should be any more for a long time.

Giuliana did not come back unexpectedly, and Maria and Castiglione were alone together from half-past two till nearly six; and during all that time there was no approach to anything which might have disturbed her certainty that they were both sure to keep the promise they had made. When they parted she laid both her

hands on his and looked up into his face a little expectantly. He might have given her one harmless kiss when he went away. But he did not. He shook his head and smiled, and he went away.

She was proud of him then; she was also a very little disappointed, though she would not have acknowledged it for worlds. He was right, of course.

When he had left Rome she made an examination of her conscience, for somehow she found it very hard to do so when she was expecting to see him soon. She was alone with herself now, and she felt strong and satisfied in every way, except that she longed to see him again. She smiled when she remembered the grim old Capuchin's words. A deadly risk? A mortal sin? What risk had she run with such a man as Castiglione? What mortal sin had she committed? She thought of her life during the past years with amazement now. Why had she suffered so much and so uselessly? Why had she never told herself the truth, faced it, humbled herself to tell it to him, and found peace in all those years? There had been a few hard moments when she had done it at last, it was true; but they were forgotten now.

Yet there was one thing she must do, and she must do it at once. She would not go back to the Capuchin, but she would certainly go to some other confessor, not her own, and make sure that she had found absolution, not for what she had done lately, since she was absolutely sure that she had done right, but for that long unacknowledged moment of weakness years ago.

No priest in his senses could refuse her absolution for that.

She meant to be as careful and scrupulous as she had ever been in the hardest days; but it was not easy to feel very humble and repentant just when she was so very happy, just when she felt that the new life was lifting her up, together with the man she loved so well.

It did not seem wrong either to go to a confessor whose name she knew, and who had the reputation of being a very mild man, who always took the most gentle and charitable point of view. She had once heard Giuliana say with a laugh that he must have listened to some astounding confessions in his day, stories that would make one's hair stand on end, because he was such a mild man, and so charitable; but even Giuliana admitted that he was as good as he was kind. There was no reason why Maria should not go to him.

She made an appointment with him in a quiet and remote church; she put on the grey veil and went in a cab in the afternoon, and she got what she hoped for. She came home, and Leone was waiting for her; and when she turned up the veil and kissed him there was a bright smile in her face.

He looked at her critically for a moment.

'To-day it was a good priest,' he said, in a satisfied tone. 'I don't hate this priest. You should always go to this one!'

'Perhaps I shall,' Maria answered, still smiling.

Early next morning she went out again, and knelt

at the altar rail of the little new oratory that stands in a side street not far from where she lived, and a young priest with a martyr's face came and gave her the Sacrament; and all was still and peaceful and happy; and she came home after her meditation, feeling that everything was right in heaven and earth, and that there could be no more sin in the world, and she would not even think of that bitter moment a week ago when she had bowed her head upon her hands and had cried out bitterly against the miserable weakness of this dying body.

She had her tea and toast in her dressing-room, and Leone sat at the same little table and had his breakfast with her. She did not quite dare to look at him just then, but his presence somehow made her almost mad with happiness. She felt that God had taken away the reproach at last, and that she had a right to her son.

So they laughed and talked, and she made beautiful plans for days in the country together, and for a month at Anzio in the hot weather, or even two, and Leone was to learn to swim and was to go out sailing with her, and they were to be just 'we two.' But were there soldiers at Anzio? Not only there were soldiers, but there was a firing ground for big guns, with butts, and sometimes one heard the cannon booming all the morning, and one could see the smoke come out and curl up after each shot. This was almost too much for the small boy, and he too went almost mad with joy and broke out with the brazen voice of healthy small-boyhood, yelling the tune of the royal march and brandish-

ing his spoon over his head as if it were a sabre and he were leading a charge of cavalry.

Then Destiny knocked at the door.

'Come in,' said Maria Montalto cheerfully.

Agostino brought a telegram, and she took it eagerly from the salver and tore it open. It could only be from Castiglione — the news that he had got his exchange into his old regiment. There was no one else in the world who would be likely to telegraph to her. Then she read the printed words.

'My mother died peacefully last night. A letter follows to-day. — DIEGO.'

Maria's face changed suddenly, and grew grave and thoughtful. Leone, who had stopped singing, laid down his spoon and watched her. He did not think she looked as if anything had hurt her very much, but he saw that something serious had happened.

She read the telegram over again, and folded it before she looked up at him.

'Your grandmama is dead, my dear,' she said gently. 'She died last night. You never saw her, but you will have to wear black for a little while.'

'Was it papa's mother?' asked Leone.

'Yes, dear. He telegraphs that he will write to-day.'

She looked out at some green trees which she could just see through the open window. Leone was reflecting on the news.

'Was she good or bad?' he asked presently.

Maria looked round and smiled faintly at the abrupt childish question.

'She was a good woman, darling.'

'Is papa like her?' asked the boy.

'Yes,' Maria replied, after a moment's thought. 'Yes, he is like his mother, I think. She was a very grand old lady with dark eyes and iron-grey hair.'

'Am I like papa?' inquired Leone.

'No, dear. You are not like him.' Maria rose from the table rather quickly.

'Why not, mama?'

'I cannot tell,' answered Maria from the window, and not looking round.

'Because most of the boys are, you know,' continued Leone. 'There's Mondo Parenzo, and Mario Campodonico, and ——'

She could have screamed.

Happily Leone remembered no more striking family likenesses just then, and presently she heard him get down from his chair and go off, as he had a way of doing when no one paid attention to what he said. It was also time for the morning inspection of his weapons, and he had lately noticed a slight tendency to rust about the breech of his newest tin gun, which worked just like a real one, and made nearly as much noise.

When Maria was alone she recovered herself almost instantly, and when her maid came to her she was quite calm. She began to give orders about mourning, for in Rome that matter is regulated by custom with the most absolute precision, to the very day, and not to conform to the rules is regarded as little less than an insult offered to the family of the relative who has died.

Montalto had a good many more or less distant relations in Rome, but it was not only out of consideration for them that Maria went into mourning on that very day and dressed Leone in black and white; if there was one being in the world whose sorrow she was bound to respect outwardly as well as in every other way, that man was her husband.

The death of the Dowager Countess of Montalto was in itself a matter of indifference to her; she was much more affected by the announcement that a letter from Montalto himself would soon be on its way to her, and by the fact that she would have to answer it. Years had elapsed since the two had written to each other, and the moment of her final reconciliation with Castiglione and with her conscience was not the one she would have chosen for renewing her correspondence with the husband she had injured.

Meanwhile she telegraphed a short and formal message expressing her profound sympathy for his bereavement. More than this she could not do.

She wrote to Castiglione later in the morning, for they had agreed that they would write very often, and she interpreted this to mean every day. But writing was very unsatisfactory now, and she felt a mad desire to see him and hear his voice. It was not that she had any great trouble to tell him, and when she had written down the news of the Countess's death it seemed a very small matter compared with what filled her heart to overflowing. She poured out her love in words she would hardly have spoken if he had

been beside her, lest the great promise should be endangered. She told him truly that he was the light of her life and the glory of her heart, and that no woman had ever loved him as she loved him; and this indeed was true, and she knew it. She called him heart of her heart and soul of her soul, she blessed him, she prayed for him, she bade him believe as she believed, lest death should part for ever what Heaven had at last made one. She wrote long and eloquently, she pressed innocently passionate kisses upon the last words, and she sent the letter on its way without reading it over.

She busied herself in all sorts of ways that day; she could not find enough to do, enough to plan, enough to occupy her thoughts; and though she did all cheerfully, telling herself that she was as happy as she had been in the early morning, there was something that hurt her, somewhere in her heart.

Giuliana came to dine alone with her that evening. Afterwards they sat together a long time, talking of many things not especially important. Then Maria spoke at last.

'Giuliana, tell me something. Do you think Leone is like his father?'

Her friend looked at her steadily for three or four seconds before she answered.

'Yes, dear. He is very like him already.'

Maria bent her head and looked at her hands before she answered.

'I think so, too,' she said. 'Thank you for telling me frankly.'

Giuliana saw that the moment was favourable for saying more, and after a little pause she leant forward in her chair, with her elbows on her knees and her chin resting on her joined fingers. Maria knew that something important was coming.

'What is it?' she asked.

'Teresa has been talking about you again, dear,' said Giuliana.

'Has she invented a new story?'

'Yes. She is telling every one that you have been seeing a great deal of Balduccio.'

Maria bent her smooth brows a little, and asked to be told more precisely what Teresa had said. Giuliana repeated to her what Parenzo had told her, and Maria listened in silence. The Marchesa concluded by saying that whether it were true or not that Castiglione was coming back to Rome, Maria ought to know what the Colonel had said about it. Maria nodded thoughtfully and still looked down.

'That much is true,' she said at last. 'He is coming back, if he can exchange. But the rest, about our meeting in quiet streets — that is pure invention.'

Giuliana looked grave. She had known something of the truth during all these years, and she had understood her friend, as she thought, and had silently sympathised with her steady effort to atone for her fault. Very good women generally draw a sharp dividing line in such cases. Giuliana had always been sorry for Maria and had helped her in many ways, without asking any confidences, to recover her self-respect and the

relative esteem of the people amongst whom she lived. But the idea that Maria should ever again, under any imaginable circumstances, meet and talk with Castiglione, even in the most innocent way, was revolting to Giuliana, and it was long since she had received such a shock as disturbed her equanimity when Maria admitted the truth of what the Duca di Casalmaggiore had told Parenzo. Her face changed instantly, she leaned back again in her chair, folded her arms, and looked at the mantelpiece. Altogether she assumed an attitude of resistance, and Maria understood that she was displeased.

'You think I am wrong to let him come back, don't you?' Maria asked, rather timidly.

'Yes,' Giuliana answered without the least hesitation, 'I do.'

'I will try and tell you what I feel and what I hope,' Maria said. 'You will understand me then, I'm sure. You will think I may be right.'

'I doubt it,' replied the Marchesa, but her crossed arms relaxed a little, and she settled herself to listen to her friend's story.

Maria spoke quietly at first. She did not mean to tell all when she began, but by degrees she felt that nothing less than the whole truth could justify her in her friend's eyes. She talked on nervously then, sometimes in a tone of passionate regret, sometimes in a strain of exaltation; she spoke very truthfully of facts, she even told of her interview with Monsignor Saracinesca and of her confession to Padre Bonaventura,

the Capuchin monk, and all this was clear enough. It was when she gave the rein to her imagination and described the ideal life of innocent love and trustfulness which she hoped to lead with Baldassare that Giuliana stopped her abruptly.

'It is not possible,' said the Marchesa. 'You should not think of such things. One can forgive a single fault in those one is very fond of, but to forgive another is quite a different matter!'

'There is no danger,' Maria answered confidently. 'But as for forgiving, the Bible says something about seventy times seven!' she smiled.

'My dear,' rejoined Giuliana, with the unconscious humour of a virtue beyond all attack, 'seventy times seven would be a great many, in practice. Besides, there is danger, I am sure. A woman capable of rising to the moral height you talk of must certainly feel an insurmountable horror of seeing the other man as long as her husband is alive. If she can forgive herself and him, she has not a very delicate conscience, it seems to me! She might possibly see him once, but after that she would beg him to stay away, out of respect for her absent husband, against whom any more meetings would be an offence. And besides, every one knows that there is nothing more absolutely false, and ridiculous, and impossible than a friendship based on love! I'm sorry if you do not like what I say, Maria, but I tell you just what I think!'

'You do, indeed!' answered the younger woman, in a hurt tone.

'I cannot help it,' said Giuliana. 'You have told me some things about yourself this evening which I never dreamt of, but nothing you have told me has had any effect on what I thought from the first. You are doing very wrong in letting Castiglione come back. You ought never to see him while your husband is alive. That is what I think, and I shall never say it again, for it is of no use to give the same advice more than once.'

Giuliana rose to go home, for it was half-past ten. Her face was grave and calm, and a little severe. Maria rose too, feeling as if a conflict had begun which must in the end force her to give up either Giuliana or Castiglione.

'Giuliana,' she said sadly, 'you will not throw over our friendship because you do not approve of everything I do, will you?'

Giuliana faced her and held out her hand frankly.

'No,' she answered. 'I'm not that sort of friend. But if I see you are going wrong I shall try to save you in spite of yourself.'

'Thank you, dear,' said Maria, trying to feel grateful; 'but I shall not go wrong. You don't quite understand me — that's all.'

'I hope you are right,' replied Giuliana, 'but I believe you are quite mistaken.'

They did not part very cordially, and when Giuliana was alone in her carriage she almost made up her mind to save her friend by force. She thought of writing to Castiglione himself, to tell him frankly that it was his duty as a man of honour to stay away. He might

possibly have accepted the warning if she had carried out her intention, but she soon saw many reasons for not interfering so directly.

'Beware of first impulses,' says the cynic, 'for they are generally good ones.'

CHAPTER VIII

Two days later Maria received a letter from Castiglione saying that his return was now a matter of certainty, but that there were formalities to be fulfilled which would take some little time. Most fortunately there was a step in the regiment. The crabbed old major of the Piedmont Lancers was promoted to be lieutenant-colonel of another regiment, the senior captain was gazetted major, and Castiglione himself would come back as the junior captain, probably during the next month.

Maria's heart beat fast, and she smiled as she thought of Giuliana's expressed determination to 'save her in spite of herself.' It was morning, and she went out alone for a walk. It was good to live to-day, and to move swiftly through the bright spring air was to be twice alive. She went by the cross streets to the Via del Veneto and through the Porta Pinciana to the Villa Borghese. She skirted the racecourse below the Dairy, and stood still a moment to watch the riders go by. Not far from her she saw Angelica Campodonico and her young brother Mario riding on each side of their teacher. The slim young girl sat straight and square and was enjoying herself, but the boy grabbed the pommel of his saddle whenever the riding-master looked

away, and seemed to stick on by his heels. He was the boy whom Leone had 'hammered,' as he expressed it, and Maria smiled as she thought of her own little son's sturdy back and small, hard fists.

Presently a young lieutenant of the Piedmont Lancers cantered up on a beautiful English mare. He rode very well, as many Italian officers now do, and he was evidently aware of it. The familiar uniform fascinated Maria, and her eyes lingered on it as the young man rode past her. He saw that she was a woman of the world, and that she was still young and pretty; and in spite of the deep black she wore, it at once occurred to him that this was the best place in the wide ring for jumping his mare in and out of the meadow over the rather stiff fence. Still Maria watched him, and he might not have been so pleased with himself if he could have guessed that she was thinking of another officer who was an even better rider than he, but who would certainly not have cared to show off before a pretty lady whom he did not know. And Maria knew that before long Baldassare del Castiglione would sometimes come and exercise his horses in the same place, and that she would very probably happen to be walking that way and would see him. And he would stop and salute her, and draw up by the outer fence and shake hands with her and exchange a few words; and his eyes would be as blue as sapphires, and she would be the proudest woman in the world, almost without knowing it. So she unconsciously smiled at the young lieutenant and turned away.

She walked on, and before long she was sitting under the ilex-trees above the Piazza di Siena. There was a new bench there; or perhaps it had only been painted. There was water in the fountain, leaping up and sparkling under the deep green trees. The basin had been dry on that winter's afternoon long ago, and the evergreen oaks had looked much darker. That had been like death; this was life itself. The past did not exist; it had never existed at all, because it had all been a horrible mistake, an untruth, and a loathsome sin; a sin confessed now, an untruth forgiven, a mistake explained and condoned. In the future all was love; and yet all was right and truthful and straightforward, as justice itself. Giuliana's warning was but the well-meant preaching of a good friend who could never understand; the grim old monk's words were far away. Where was the deadly risk, or the mortal sin? God was strong and good, and would make all good deeds seem easy; and she and the man she loved would rise far beyond this dying body, by that good, to be united for ever in light and peace. Baldassare would believe, as she did, and in the end they would find heaven together.

She leaned back, and her eyes looked upwards as she sat there alone, and in all her being there was not the least thought that was not innocent and pure and beautiful. She communed with herself as with an angel, and with the image of the man she loved as with a saint. She felt as she felt sometimes when she knelt at early morning before the altar rail of the little oratory

near her house, and the young priest with his martyr's face came softly down and ministered to her.

She almost trembled when she rose at last to leave the place where she had been lifted up from the world, the place where she had once spoken such bitter and cruel words to him who was now once more the heart of her heart and the soul of her soul. She walked homewards in a deep, sweet dream of refreshment.

The footman opened the door, and as she entered the small bright hall she saw a big letter with a black border and Spanish stamps lying upon some others, and she knew Montalto's large, stiff handwriting. Her heart sank, though she had expected the letter for two days.

She took it with no outward show of emotion, for she felt that the servant was watching and that he guessed whence it came. In a steady voice she asked if Leone had come in from his walk with old Agostino, and the footman told her they were still out. Her Excellency would remember that the Signorino was gone to the gardens of the Palazzo Trasmondo to play with his little friends.

Maria went to her sitting-room without calling her maid, and sat down to read her husband's letter with closed doors. She felt strong and brave, and resolved to think of the absent man with all the respect Giuliana Parenzo could have exacted from her.

It was a very long letter, filling several big black-edged sheets; but the handwriting was large and stiff, and easy to read, and at first her eyes followed the words quickly and unhesitatingly.

Montalto was deeply affected by his mother's death; that was evident in the short, strained sentences that were painfully formal save for a heart-broken word here and there. Conscientiously he told his wife the short story of the illness during the last days, the last hours, at the last minute, at the end. She read with a sort of reverence, but she wondered why he gave her every detail. Had he come to her for sympathy, after all the stern and unforgiving years that had passed?

Then she took the next sheet, and the truth broke upon her. So far, he had given her an account of what had happened, of how his mother had suddenly begun to sink and had died peacefully after receiving all the Sacraments. But he had not told what her last words had been.

'My dear son,' she had said just before she had closed her eyes for ever, 'I have been very unforgiving towards your wife. Perhaps I have helped to make you so. Promise me that you will go to her and ask her pardon for me. And be reconciled with her, if God wills that it be possible.'

She had said all these words with great distinctness, for she had been calm and fully conscious, and able to speak until the last moment of her life; and then her heart had stopped beating and death had come quietly.

Maria held the sheet before her with both her hands, trying to go on, and determined to read bravely to the end, but it was a long time before she got to the next words, and she felt as if she had been unexpectedly condemned to die.

The man she had injured meant to fulfil his mother's last request to the letter. For he asked his erring wife's pardon for the dead woman who had not been able to forgive her till the end. He asked her to write out the message to the dead and send it to him.

That would be the easiest part. How could Maria find it hard to say that she forgave what she had deserved? But the rest was different.

He went on to say that it was not only for his mother's sake that he wished to be reconciled: it was for his own. In spite of all, he loved Maria dearly. He had known how she had lived, how her whole life since he had finally left her had been an atonement for one fault; and that one fault he now freely forgave her. He would never speak of it again, he said, for he was sure that she had suffered more from it than he himself.

She guessed, as she read, what it must have cost him to say that much. He earnestly desired a reconciliation. He wished to come back to Rome to live in his own house, with his wife, before all the world. With a pathetic inability to put his feelings into words, he said that he would try to make her happy 'by all means acceptable to her.' Yet he did not wish to force this reconciliation upon her, for he was well aware that in leaving her he had conferred on her a measure of independence and had given her good reason to suppose that he would never come back. Unless she willingly agreed to what he now offered, he would never come back to Rome; for it had been one thing to stay with his invalid mother, leaving his wife to live where she

pleased, but it would be quite another in the eyes of the world if he returned to his own house and his wife continued to stay in a hired house. Hitherto there had been no scandal which his authority could not now put down, no open break which might not still be repaired with dignity. Then, on a sudden, the writing became less stiff and clear, and the lonely man's full heart overflowed. He loved her so dearly — he did not repeat 'in spite of all' — why might he not hope to make her happy at last? In the past he had not known how to show her how tenderly, how devotedly, he had loved her; he had been but a dull companion for her; she had been made to marry him almost against her will. Without again speaking of her fault he was finding excuses for what he had forgiven. And the burden came back again and again, he loved her with all his heart. It was no mere empty show of reconciliation that he offered her, for the sake of his name, for what the world might say or think. He wished, he asked to be allowed, to take her back altogether, wholly, as if there had been no division.

Maria held the sheet tight between her upraised hands, but a painful tremor ran through her to the tips of her fingers, and the paper shook before her eyes.

She had reached the end now. He had poured out his soul as he had never done before then to any living being; but quite at the last line his natural formality returned, he 'begged the favour of a speedy reply at her convenience,' and he signed his name in full — 'Diego Silani di Montalto.'

After a long time Maria rose from her seat, and her face was almost grey. She went to her writing-table and opened a small desk with a simple little gold key she wore on her watch chain. The receptacle was already half full of Castiglione's letters, and she laid her husband's on top of the heap, shut down the lid, and turned the key again.

Just then Leone burst into the room, lusty and radiant. He stopped short when he saw his mother's face.

'You have been to see the bad priest again!' he cried angrily.

'No, dear, I shall not go to see him again. I have had a great — a great surprise. Papa is coming back soon.'

CHAPTER IX

Maria did not hesitate, though she felt as if her heart must break with every throbbing beat. Whether Giuliana Parenzo was just or not in telling her that she had not a very delicate conscience, she had at least a strong will and a lasting determination to do what she thought right, which more than made up for the absence of that sensitiveness on which her happier friend laid so much stress.

Until Leone asked her what was the matter, her thoughts whirled in a chaos of pain and darkness, but there was little or no hesitation in her answer to his question. She wished with all her heart that she had put him off until there had been nothing in her face to betray her, and that he might never have connected her too evident distress with the news she had just received. But she had spoken because her mind was made up in that moment, and her determination found words at once; and the child at once hated the man who was coming back.

She was going to accept the proffered reconciliation outright, if it killed her, and she really believed that it might. Her dream of light and peace ended then; she had atoned, perhaps, but that was not enough. Atonement means reconciling, and such a reconciling

meant to Maria an expiation more dreadful than she had dreamed of. She remembered only too vividly the material repulsion for Montalto that had grown upon her quickly in the first months of their life together, and she knew that it would be stronger now than it had been then. Yet she must live through it and hide it. To her it seemed inconceivable that he should wish to come back to her at all. The nobler sort of women can never understand that men they dislike can love them, and to be given in marriage to one of them is a torment and feels like an outrage.

Maria meant to bear it all as well as she could. A woman able to dream of such a lofty and spiritual love as had appeared possible to her in a short and unforgettable vision was not one to hesitate at a sacrifice, much less if justice demanded it. In old Jerusalem would she not have been stoned to death? Yet that would have been the quick end of all suffering, whereas Montalto's return was only the beginning of something much worse.

It is often easier to forgive than to accept forgiveness. After Maria had read her husband's letter there were times when she wished that all his love for her could be turned into hatred. He might come back then, to show the world a comedy of a reconciliation, though he might frankly detest the sight of her; he might come back and behave to her as he had after she had admitted her guilt, and never speak to her except from necessity, while treating her always with that same formal courtesy he had learned from his Spanish mother. It would

have been easy to bear that; it would have been far easier then to live without seeing the man of her heart. But to be taken back to be loved, to be cherished and caressed, to be the instrument of happiness in the life of the husband she had dishonoured, and whose mere presence and slightest touch made her writhe — that was going to be hard indeed. Yet she meant to bear it. In her simple faith she prayed only that it might be counted to her hereafter as a part of her purgatory.

Castiglione received her letter telling him all the truth and bidding him stay where he was, if he could, or at least not try to see her if he were obliged to come to Rome. His first impulse was to ask for leave again, if only for three days, and to go to her at once to implore her to refuse Montalto's offer, to risk anything rather than let her accept an existence which he knew would be one of misery. He felt and believed that it would kill her.

In some ways the thought of it was even more revolting to him than to her. He had been faithful for years to the memory of the love which he believed he had destroyed in her; but now that all was changed, now that he knew how she loved him, she was his, his very own, far more than she had ever been. He felt, too, that she had really raised him above his old self; that he could really live near her, see her, talk with her, and touch her hand, and love her as he had promised, with no shame, or thought of shame, to her or to himself. Long years of clean living had already made him different from his comrades, and his unchanging will

made a law for himself which he had never transgressed. Does the world think that beyond the pale of holy orders, of whatsoever persuasion, there are no men who live as he did, faithful and true to one dear memory to the very end? Sometimes what we call the world seems to know more of its patent evil than of its own hidden good. And where the good is strong and rules a man's secret life, it may lead him far.

But Castiglione was only human, and his jealousy of Montalto was cruel when it woke again. It had been great in old days, but it was ten times more dangerous now, for it had been long asleep in security and it awoke in anger. Maria had not been his own, but throughout that time no other man had called her his, and now Montalto claimed her, under his right to forgive an injury if he chose, and she was going to submit and surrender herself.

He wrote her a passionate letter, imploring her not to ruin both their lives by giving herself back to her husband, and beseeching her to see him at once that he might tell her all he could not write. If he could not get leave again so soon he would come without, if it cost him a long arrest. Maria was to telegraph her answer, and if no message came within two days he would start, whatever happened. As for declining the exchange he had asked, he could not do that; he would be ordered to join his old regiment in Rome during the next ten days at the latest, and it was impossible that he should not meet her sometimes.

For a moment Maria hesitated, for she felt that he

was desperate, and she herself was not far from despair. But something human on which she had never counted helped her a little. If Castiglione came suddenly to Rome, it would be known, and it would surely be said that he had come to see her; if no one else knew it, Teresa Crescenzi surely would, and would tell every one. She thought of Montalto's letter, telling her that he had known of her quiet life, and that the dignity she had shown had appealed to him. He should not come back now to be told that he had been deceived, and that Castiglione made long journeys expressly to see her. Her pride would not suffer that.

She went out on foot and entered the small telegraph office outside the railway station, for she could not have sent her message by a servant's hand. She took the ink-crusted pen and a flimsy blank form, and thought of what she should say. The shabby young clerk at the little sliding window would have to read the telegram, and perhaps he knew her by sight. She thought a moment longer, and then wrote a few words:—

'Impossible. If you really wish to help a person in great distress, be patient. Await letter.'

This looked very cold when it was written, but she thought it would do, and she felt sure that Castiglione would obey her request. At least, he could not leave Milan until he received the letter she was about to write to him.

It reached him on the following evening, and in the tender, beseeching words he read what was worse than a sentence of exile. But he submitted then, for it was

as if she spoke to him, and he could hear every tone of her voice in the silence of his room. Since she had taken him back to her heart she dominated him by the nobility of her love, and by her touching trust in his. He read her letter twice, and then burnt it in the empty fireplace, carefully setting a second match to the last white shreds that showed at the edges of the thin black ashes.

'You are a saint on earth,' he said to her in his thoughts. 'You are good enough to make a man believe in God.'

Perhaps he rose one step higher in that moment, for he was in earnest. But it had cost him much. For three days he had kept his valise packed and ready to start at any moment, and he saw it lying in a corner as he turned from the fireplace. Once again the strong temptation came upon him to take it and go downstairs. That would be the irrevocable step, for he knew well enough that if he went so far as that he would not turn back.

His big jaw thrust itself forward rather savagely as he crossed the room, picked up the valise, and set it on a chair to unpack it. When he had put his things away he threw it into a corner, lit a cigar, and sat down by the open window to watch the people in the broad street. He hoped that he might not think for a little while.

There was a knock at the door and his orderly came in with a telegram. He almost started at the sight of the brownish yellowish little square of folded paper in the man's hand.

'Join us at once to ride in military races on Thursday. War Office telegraphs order exchange to your colonel to-night. Make haste, in order to rest your horses. Welcome back to the regiment. — CASALMAGGIORE, *Colonel.*'

Castiglione's hand dropped upon his knee, holding the open telegram. The orderly stood motionless, stolidly waiting to be sent away. He would have waited in the same position till he dropped, but it seemed a long time before the officer turned his head.

'Pack everything to-night,' he said. 'Telephone in my name to the station and order a box for the horses as far as Pisa, and be ready to start with them by the first train to-morrow. I am to join the Piedmont Lancers in Rome at once. You will spend the night in Pisa to rest the horses, and come on with them the next day. I will attend to your leave and pass. Take what you need for yourself for four days. You will have a day and a night in Rome.'

The orderly was a good man and could be trusted. Castiglione got into his best tunic, buckled on his sabre, took his cap and gloves, thrust the telegram into his breast pocket, and went to take leave of his colonel and his brother officers, wherever he might find them. He was in no hurry, but it was a relief to get out of doors, and he walked slowly along the broad pavement, returning the salutes of the many soldiers who passed him.

It would be quite out of the question to disobey such a summons as he had just received. Nothing short of a

feigned illness could have excused a short delay, and besides, the wording of the telegram showed that he was wanted for the honour of his old regiment in the coming races. He had always been the best rider of them all, and if the Piedmont Lancers did not make a good appearance, owing to his voluntary absence, he would not be easily forgiven; indeed, he would hardly have forgiven himself.

But he would not write or telegraph to Maria that he was coming, and he was sure that she would not write to him again unless he answered her letter. Once in Rome, he meant to send her the telegram he had in his pocket, to prove that he had been ordered back, and that his coming had not been voluntary. She would see him then, for it would be different; she could not refuse, as she might if she thought he had come in spite of her letter. His exchange had been at most but a matter of days; it had become a matter of hours. So much the better, since fate condescended to help him a little.

The vision of hope he had enjoyed so short a time rose before him again. Montalto might not return after all, or he might break his neck on the way, but Castiglione doubted the probability of such a termination to his own troubles.

CHAPTER X

The workmen were very busy at the Palazzo Montalto, and the rich widow from Chicago who occupied one of the large apartments was a little nervous, for there is a clause in all leases of portions of Roman palaces to the effect that the owner may turn any tenant out at short notice if he needs the rooms for his own use; and as the good lady had not the slightest idea of the real size of the place, she had long supposed that she was living in the state apartment.

But she need not have disturbed herself and her friends about that. Montalto would as soon have let the place where his mother and his wife had lived with him as he would have put up his titles at auction. He had sent orders that the vast suite was to be got ready in a month's time, and as no one had expected that he would ever come back to live there, the accumulation of dust was found to be portentous. Moreover, all the carpets had disappeared, no one knew how, the upholstered furniture was all moth-eaten, the window fastenings would not work, the mirrors were hopelessly tarnished, and the ceiling of the ballroom had been badly damaged by the bursting of a water-pipe in the apartment over it.

To make matters worse, the old steward of the Roman

estates, whose business it was to keep the palace in order, was in his dotage, and was expected to have a stroke of apoplexy at any moment.

Then one morning a business-like young man arrived from Montalto, the great family seat on the Austrian frontier, with instructions to put matters right, and to lose no time about it. The old Roman steward flew into a frightful rage because the Montalto steward was his superior, and promptly had his stroke of apoplexy, which helped things a little without killing him. The business-like young man spent one whole day in watching the people at work and never said a word, but when the evening came, he had them all paid and he turned them out, to their amazement and mortification. Then he took a cab and drove to the Via San Martino and asked to see the Countess, just before she dressed for dinner. He was a very modest young man, and he waited in the hall for her answer; and when Agostino came back to inquire more particularly who he was and what he wanted, he said that he was the chief steward of Montalto and had a message from His Excellency the Count to Her Excellency the Countess, if she would be so kind as to receive him. In the eyes of the butler he at once became an important personage, and many apologies were offered for having let him wait in the outer hall.

Maria received him in her sitting-room. In her deep mourning she looked unnaturally pale, and her dark eyes seemed very big. She pointed to a chair and sat down herself.

The young man lost no time and told her at once that the Count had sent him to see that the palace was made habitable at once, and desired that the Countess should be consulted on every point about which she was willing to give her opinion. She was to select her own rooms and direct that they should be hung and furnished to her taste, and the Count would esteem it a great favour if she would take the trouble to order everything else to be changed as she thought best, excepting only the late Dowager Countess's rooms, which he desired should not be touched. Her Excellency doubtless knew which those rooms were, and would she be so very kind as to say when it would be convenient for her to meet her obedient servant at the palace and to give him her orders. He was instructed to spare no trouble or expense in order to please her if possible.

Maria recognised her husband's formal expressions in what the quiet young man said so fluently. Doubtless Montalto had written every word of his orders with his own hand, and the steward had read them over till he knew them by heart. She thanked him and said she would meet him at the palace the next morning at ten o'clock.

She did not take Leone with her, for she was sure that the great neglected house would be gloomy beyond description, and she did not wish him to have a sad impression of the house in which he had been born, and in which he was now to live. Besides, she could not quite trust herself, and the small boy's eyes were marvellously quick to detect any change in her face.

The places where things very good or very bad to remember have happened to us are ever afterwards inhabited by invisible ghosts, kind or malignant, who show themselves to us when we revisit the spots they haunt, though they never disturb any one else. Maria knew that; an evil genius had long dwelt under those ilex-trees in the Villa Borghese, and she had exorcised it, but there were spectres in her former home that would not be laid. She bit her lip as she entered the once familiar hall, and saw room after room opening out beyond it in a long perspective that ended in a closed door adorned with mirrors in its panels. That door had always been kept shut when all the others were open; it led into the room that had been her boudoir. Even at that great distance Maria could see how dim the old glasses in the panels had become.

She walked slowly through the apartment, looking to the right and left. Something had been done, but not much. There was a ladder against a wall in one room and the hangings were half torn down; a dozen rolls of new carpet lay in confusion in another, redolent of that extraordinary odour which only perfectly new carpets have; in one of the halls beyond, a quantity of more or less decrepit sofas and chairs had been collected and disembowelled, and the moth-eaten wool and musty horse-hair lay about them in mouldering heaps; the portraits were still in their places on the walls, and Montalto seemed to look sadly down from half a dozen frames at his young wife as she went by in black; there was Montalto in armour and Montalto in black velvet

and ruffles, Montalto in a Spanish cloak and Montalto in a flowered silk French coat, with a powdered wig; but it was always Montalto; the likeness between them all from generation to generation had been amazing, and the old pictures made Maria nervous.

The young steward, whose name was Orlando Schmidt, walked by her left, hat in hand, glancing respectfully at her now and then to see whether she was going to say anything. But her lips were pressed together, and he fancied that the rings round her eyes grew darker as she neared the end of the long suite, and still went on towards the closed door with its tarnished mirrors. She looked very pale and tired.

'Will your Excellency sit down and rest a while?' he asked.

'Not yet, thank you. Presently.'

And she went slowly on, slowly and steadily, towards the closed door, till she laid her hand on the chiselled handle and turned it and pushed against the panel. But it would not move.

'Perhaps it is locked,' suggested Schmidt. 'I had not taken it for a real door. I thought the apartment ended here.'

'No,' Maria answered in a low tone. 'This used to be my boudoir. Try and open it. I want to go in.'

The young man tried the handle, put his eye to the keyhole, and tried again. Then he shook his head.

'It is not a very strong door,' said Maria. 'I think we could break it open. I want to go in.'

'I can certainly break it,' answered Schmidt.

He threw his shoulder against the crack and pushed with all his might, but though the door creaked a little it would not move.

'Is there no other way?' asked Maria impatiently. 'I must get in!'

'Oh, yes,' Schmidt answered, 'there is another way. I can smash the lock.'

'I wish you would!'

He stood back and made a little gesture with his hand for her to move aside, and before she knew what he was going to do, the heel of his heavy walking boot struck the lock with the force of a small battering-ram. The door flew back on its hinges into total darkness, and there was a crash of broken glass as one of the mirrors fell from its panel to the marble Venetian pavement.

Maria uttered a little cry of hurt surprise, for what Schmidt had done seemed brutal to her; but she passed him quickly and went on into the dark, and the bits of broken mirror cracked under her tread. She was sure that the room had never been opened since she had left it, and she went straight to one of the windows without running against the furniture; the familiar fastenings had rusted and she could not move them quickly. Schmidt lit a wax-light and followed, but before he reached her side she had succeeded in opening the inner shutters, and the bright light from the slits in the blinds shone into the room through the dim panes.

Maria turned from the window and looked about her.

The furniture stood as she had last seen it. A moment later Schmidt threw open the glass and the blinds and the violent sunshine flooded the dusty marble floor, the faded pink silk on the walls, the tarnished inlaid tables, the chairs, and a little sofa near the fireplace.

'It is too much!' cried Maria nervously. 'There is too much light!'

Schmidt drew the blinds near together without quite shutting them. When he looked behind him again Maria was sitting on the little sofa near the fireplace, her face turned from him, and her fingers were nervously pulling at a rent in the pink silk which tore under her touch. But the young steward did not notice the action, and was already making a mental list of the repairs that would be necessary to make the boudoir habitable again. Maria looked ill, and he thought she was tired.

But the evil spirit that haunted the place was there, beside her on the little sofa, and she could hear its demon whisper in her ear. That was a part of her expiation, and she knew it. Then she spoke to Schmidt steadily, but without turning her head.

'I wish everything taken out of this room,' she said, and she listened to her own voice to be sure that it did not shake. 'Everything must be new, the hangings, the ceiling, the furniture, the fireplace. You see how dilapidated it all is, don't you?'

She asked the question as if to justify her orders.

'There is nothing fit to keep,' answered the steward, 'except that inlaid writing-table and the bookcase.'

'I prefer to have them changed, too,' said Maria quickly. 'Everything! Let the new things be dark. There is too much light here. Not red, either. I hate red. Let everything be dark grey.'

'A greenish grey, perhaps?' suggested Schmidt diffidently.

'Yes, yes! But dark, very dark, with black furniture. Paint this marble fireplace black ——'

'Black?' exclaimed the young man, with a polite interrogation. 'Perhaps it would be better to have a new one of black marble then?'

'Yes — anything, provided it is changed, and everything is new and quite different! That is all I want. And my dressing-room was there.' She pointed to a second door. 'My bedroom was beyond it. I'm sure that door is locked, too. Could you go round by the other way and see if the key is on that side?'

She turned her white face to Schmidt. He guessed that she had been moved by some strong association and wished to be alone to recover herself, and in a moment he was gone; for he was a tactful person.

When she was alone she did not bury her face in the corner of the tattered little sofa, nor did any tears rise in her tired eyes; she only sat there quite still, and her head fell forward as if she had fainted; but her fingers slowly tore little shreds from the faded pink silk of the sofa.

Schmidt stayed away a long time. She heard his footsteps at last on a tiled floor in the distance, and raised her hand quickly to cover her eyes, while her lips

moved for a moment. When the steward unlocked the second door and came in, she was standing quietly by the window waiting for him.

The worst was over for that day, and though she was still very pale, she was no longer deadly white, and the haunted look that had come back suddenly to her eyes was gone. She went through the house systematically after that, conscientiously fulfilling her husband's requests; she gave clear directions about her own rooms and the one she meant to give Leone, and made many suggestions about the rest. She showed Schmidt the little apartment once occupied by her mother-in-law, and advised the steward to have it carefully cleaned and set in order, since nothing was to be changed in it. At present, she said, it looked neglected, and the Count would certainly not like to find it so. Schmidt nodded gravely, as if he quite understood. She was so quiet and calm now, that he thought he had been mistaken in thinking her disturbed by some poignant memory. She had probably felt ill.

When she left the palace at last, she told him to let her know when the refurnishing was so far advanced as to make a visit from her necessary, and she thanked him so kindly for his attention that he blushed a little.

For Orlando Schmidt was a modest and well-educated young man, of a respectable Austrian family by his father's side, but an Italian as to his nationality. He had been to good schools, he had studied scientific farming at an agricultural institute in Upper Austria, and he had followed a commercial course in Milan; he

had also learned something about practical building, and was naturally possessed of tolerably good taste.

'I hope you will stay here and take charge of the Roman estate,' said the Countess. 'I fancy the lands are in as bad a condition as the apartment upstairs.'

She smiled graciously, and Schmidt blushed again.

'Your Excellency is very kind,' he said modestly, as he stood beside her low phaeton with his hat in his hand. 'I am lodged here in the palace, if you need me.'

She drove away, and before the carriage turned the corner of the palace on the way to the more central part of the city, she had quite forgotten Orlando Schmidt, though he had made such a favourable impression upon her.

But the young man stood before the great arched entrance and watched her till she was out of sight, with an expression she could not have understood; and afterwards he whistled softly as he turned back to ascend the stairs again in order to make careful notes of all she had said about each room. He began in the boudoir, and he sat down on the little sofa near the fireplace, with his large note-book on his knee, and wrote busily while her words were still fresh in his memory. Once or twice he looked towards the door, which he could see as he sat, and the broken pieces of mirror caught his eye. He remembered that his Italian mother had once told him when he was a boy that it was very unlucky to break a mirror. But he smiled at the recollection, for he was not a superstitious young man, and had received a half-scientific education.

It was nearly twelve o'clock when Maria left the palace. She had not realised that it was so late, and she had told the coachman to take her to a dressmaker's far down the Corso, near the Piazza del Popolo. She was to have tried on a couple of frocks which were necessary to complete her mourning; but the gun-fire from the Janiculus and the clashing of all the church bells told her that it was noon already, and too late, for Leone always had his dinner with her at half-past twelve. She touched Telemaco's broad black back with the edge of her parasol to call his attention, and she told him to go home instead of stopping at the dressmaker's.

He asked whether he should pass through the Villa by Porta Pinciana, that being as near a way as any other, and easy for the horses, and she nodded her assent. She had not been in the Villa since the day when she had walked there alone, and had gone home and found Montalto's letter.

It was a warm spring morning, but the horses trotted briskly up the main avenue that leads in from the gate, glad to be in the pleasant shade. Maria lowered her parasol to the bottom of the phaeton without shutting it, for she knew she should need it again in a few minutes. There was no other carriage in the avenue just then, but several riders were walking their horses slowly towards the gate after exercising them on the course. The first she met were two civilians, and one of them was Oderisio Boccapaduli. He recognised her from a distance, and before he was near enough to bow he

glanced quickly behind him, as if he expected to see some one. She did not know the other man. Oderisio took off his hat, and she smiled and nodded. Then came a captain of artillery on a strong Hungarian horse that was evidently in a bad temper and hard to manage. Maria turned her head to watch them after she had passed, but her carriage was going at a smart pace and she soon looked before her again. Not far ahead were two officers of the Piedmont Lancers, walking their horses and talking together.

One was the same young lieutenant who had jumped his English mare in and out of the ring for her benefit on that morning when she had been on foot. She might have met him there any day. The other was Baldassare del Castiglione, and she had not known that he was in Rome.

She was so startled that she made a movement to raise her open parasol and hide her face; but she instantly understood the absurdity of doing such a thing and dropped it again, and looked steadily towards the advancing horsemen, though for a few seconds she could not see them. They were hidden in a fiery mist that rose between her and them. It dissolved suddenly, and Castiglione was gravely saluting her; his face was calm, but his eyes were blazing blue. The young lieutenant raised his hand to his cap almost at the same instant. With infinite difficulty Maria slowly bent her head in answer, but she did not turn her eyes as the two men passed her, and in another moment she had left them behind.

Then she felt that her heart was beating again, for she was sure that it had quite stopped. But at the same instant her hand unconsciously relaxed, and her open parasol, which was already half over the step of the phaeton, flew out, rolled a little way, and lay in the middle of the road, with the handle upwards.

She sat up quickly and called to Telemaco to stop. But the old man was a little deaf, and she had to call twice before he checked the quickly-trotting pair and brought them to a stand.

'My parasol!' she cried, as the coachman looked over his shoulder. 'Give me the reins and get it,' she added.

She heard the hoofs of a horse cantering up behind her, and she looked round. Castiglione must have turned in the saddle to look after her, and must have seen the parasol fall. It lay with the handle upward, and parasol handles chanced to be long that year. It was easy for a good rider to bend low and pick the thing up almost without slackening his pace, and in another moment he was beside the carriage giving it back to Maria.

'Thank you,' she said faintly. 'I did not know you were in Rome.'

A quick word rose to his lips, but he checked it. Then he bent down to her from the saddle, on pretence of brushing an imaginary fly from his horse's shoulder.

'I thought you would rather not know it from me,' he said quietly, but so low that the deaf coachman could not hear. 'Good morning, Contessa,' he added

more loudly, as he straightened himself in the saddle and saluted again.

He was gone, trotting back to join his companion; but she would not look after him when she had told Telemaco to drive on. And all the way home a great wave of joy was surging up round her, to her very feet, and she was trying to climb higher lest it should rise and overwhelm her; and she was clinging to something dark, and cold, and hard as a black marble pillar, that was Montalto, and duty, and death, all in one.

That afternoon a note came for her, brought to the door by a trooper and left with the remark that there was no answer.

It contained the telegram Castiglione had received in Milan, and a sheet of note-paper on which a few words were written in pencil.

'This explains itself,' he wrote. 'It is the inevitable. I shall not try to see you.' She knew that she ought to be proud of his good faith, but it was not easy.

CHAPTER XI

More than a month had passed and it was near the end of May; yet Maria had not again exchanged a word with Castiglione. She had seen him twice in the street, from a distance, but she was not sure that he had seen her the second time. If he saw her, he certainly wished her to think that he did not. She never went to the Villa Borghese, nor drove towards Tor di Quinto nor along the beautiful Monte Parioli avenue, lest she should meet him in one of those places where officers ride at all hours of the day. On his side, he avoided the streets through which she was likely to pass. It was easy enough to do that, and as she was in mourning he was sure not to find her where people met in the houses of mutual acquaintances.

For he had no intention of shutting himself up, being much too sensible not to foresee that if he did so people would say he spent his time with her. He showed himself in many places, on the contrary, frequented Teresa Crescenzi's drawing-room at tea-time, dined assiduously with his cousins the Boccapaduli, at whose house the old-fashioned Romans congregated, and also with the Campodonico, and he was often at the Parenzos' pretty house in the Via Ludovisi, which was a favourite gathering-place of the political party then in power,

and of that portion of the diplomatic corps which was accredited to the Quirinal and not to the Vatican. The Duca di Casalmaggiore had become a friend of Parenzo's, and Castiglione took a good deal of pains to be seen as often as possible in society by his colonel, who was of an inquisitive turn of mind. In order to make his existence still more patent in the eyes of his comrades, he lodged with one of them, a man of his own age who was also not very well off, and who could hardly help knowing where Baldassare went, what he did, and whether he received many notes addressed in feminine handwriting or not. The consequence of all this, and of his assiduity in matters of duty, was that Teresa Crescenzi's latest story got little credit, and his brother officers said that he was ambitious and was going in for the career in earnest. The colonel, who was a widower with a son in the navy and a daughter married in Naples, and whom Teresa had once vainly tried to capture for herself, disliked her and so effectually ridiculed her invention that the rest of Castiglione's comrades fell into the way of laughing at her, too; and they said that after having failed to marry the colonel she had tried to catch Baldassare, and now meant to revenge herself because he would not have her. His chum, too, told them that he certainly had no secret love affair, and that when he was not on duty or at the officers' club, or where every one could see him, he was in his lodgings reading German books on military tactics. Clearly he was going in for the career.

He did not act or look like a man in love either; not

in the least. He had not been talkative before he left the regiment, but since he had returned he took more pains than formerly to join in the conversation. Another point in his favour was that he never had any vague engagement which hindered him from joining in anything that was unexpectedly proposed. Whatever he had to do was open and definite; when it was not duty, it was a real promise to dine with some one whom he named, and he took care to have it known that he went; or else he had agreed to ride somewhere with an acquaintance, and if any one took the trouble to go to that place, there he was, sure enough, with the man he had named. In what was left of society so late in the season, if he once talked especially to any one woman he gave himself as much pains to amuse and interest another on the morrow. He was such a model of a sensible man and such a good officer that the colonel, who was rich enough to have afforded the luxury of a poor son-in-law, wished he had another daughter that he might marry her to Castiglione; and he said so openly, to the great edification of Roman society.

As for Maria Montalto she did not speak of him again to Giuliana, but the latter knew she never let him come to the house and that she had made up her mind to see him as rarely as possible. Giuliana was too simple and natural to care whether this excellent state of things was due to her own advice or to Montalto's approaching return. It was enough that Maria was doing right and giving the gossips nothing to talk about.

Parenzo and his wife went to England at this time,

with the intention of spending three weeks there. The Marchese, it was understood, was entrusted with some special political business, and as a matter of course he took his wife with him; for the first time in her life Maria was glad to part from her old friend.

There are ordeals which it is easier to face alone than under the eyes of others, even of those we love best; there are tortures which are a little easier to bear when our dearest friends are not watching our faces to see if we shall wince.

The date of Montalto's return was approaching, and the state apartment in the palace was almost ready, thanks to Orlando Schmidt's quiet energy and to a rather lavish expenditure of money. He was a truly wonderful young man, Maria thought, for he seemed to know everything that was useful and possessed the power of making people work without so much as complaining till they were quite exhausted. He never raised his voice, he never spoke roughly to a workman; but he seemed to inspire something like terror and abject submission in all whom he employed, and they spoke in whispers when he was near and worked till they could work no longer.

Maria went to the apartment twice again, once to select the hangings and stuffs for her own rooms out of a quantity that had been sent for her approval, and once again when the furnishing was almost finished. She was quiet and collected, for nothing was left to remind her of the old boudoir and the rest. At her second visit she was surprised to find that the small room had three

doors instead of two as formerly, and she asked the steward if the third one was real, or an imitation fastened against the solid wall for the sake of symmetry.

'It is a real door,' answered Schmidt. 'It had been thinly walled up and plastered over long ago, and I found it accidentally, and took the liberty of opening it again. I hope your Excellency will approve.'

'It looks well,' Maria said, for it helped to change the aspect of the room; 'but where does it take one?'

'To the chapel,' replied the steward. 'I found a narrow passage leading directly to a small door on the left side of the altar. You can thus reach the chapel by a private way without going through the apartment. The corridor was quite dark, but I have had electric light put in. The key is here, you see.'

Schmidt moved it and opened the door at the same time with his other hand, and Maria saw a narrow passage, brightly lit up. The walls were white and varnished, and the floor was of plain white tiles.

'It must have been made in the beginning of the eighteenth century,' Schmidt said. 'There was a Countess at that time who was a princess of Saxony and was excessively devout. She died mad.'

'You know the family history better than I do,' observed Maria.

'We have served the Excellent house from father to son more than two hundred years.'

Schmidt said this as if he were telling her the most ordinary fact in the world.

'Will your Excellency please go to the chapel by the private passage?' he asked.

Maria let him lead the way and followed him. She was gratified by the use he had made of his discovery, for she thought that it would sometimes be a relief to go to the chapel alone and unnoticed. But she also wished to assure herself that no one else could use the corridor, and that there was a bolt or a lock on the door at the other end. It was not that she distrusted Schmidt; on the contrary, she thought very well of him, and was sure that he had consulted only her convenience in what he had done. But when she thought of what was before her, she felt very defenceless in the great old house, so different from the comfortable little modern apartment in which she had lived with Leone, where there were no hidden staircases, nor secret passages, nor legends of mad countesses in the eighteenth century, nor any ghosts of Maria's own life.

Apparently Schmidt had told her the exact truth about the passage, which was much longer than she had expected, and turned to the right very soon, and was straight beyond that for twenty yards or more. Maria guessed that it here followed the long wall of the great ball-room, which had no entrances opposite the windows. She reached the door of the chapel, and the electric light showed her a strong new bolt with a brass knob, besides the spring latch.

'It is quite private, you see,' said Schmidt. 'The door can be fastened from this side.'

'I see. It is very satisfactory. You have thought of everything.'

He opened the door of the small dim chapel, but she would not go in. It had memories for her which she was afraid to stir. She remembered how she had once gone there alone between midnight and morning with a great horror upon her; and how she had knelt down, setting her candlestick on the pavement beside her; and the dawn had found her there still. She knew also that in another week or ten days she would have to kneel there at mass on a Sunday; and Montalto would be kneeling on one side of her, and Leone with his bright blue eyes would be on the other.

'Thank you,' she said to the steward. 'I will not go into the chapel now.'

'Nothing has been changed there,' he answered. 'It has merely been thoroughly cleaned.'

Maria remembered the two hideous barocco angels in impossible gilt draperies that supported a dreadful gilt canopy above the tabernacle; and the absurd decorations of the miniature dome; and the detestable assemblage of many-coloured marbles; and all the details that recalled the atrocious taste introduced under the Spanish influence in the south of Italy during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. She had seen nothing of all that when she had come there alone, long after midnight, years ago, with only her one flicker-

ing candle to light her through the great dark rooms and to show her where the altar was.

'I thought the Count would not like to have electric light in the chapel,' said Schmidt, as he fastened the door carefully. 'The key for the lights in the passage is here on the wall, your Excellency, just on a level with the lock as you come in.'

'It is really very well arranged,' Maria answered, and as the passage was not wide enough for two persons to pass conveniently, she turned and led the way back.

'I have had the walls varnished, because almost any sort of tinting might rub off on your Excellency's dress,' said Schmidt. 'The passage is so extremely narrow, you see.'

'It is very nice,' Maria answered. 'It was most sensible of you.'

Behind her, Orlando Schmidt blushed with pleasure at her praise, and watched her graceful moving figure, shown off against the shining white walls by the close-fitting black she wore. They reached the boudoir, and there also Schmidt closed and locked the door. But this time he took out the key and handed it to Maria.

'As the passage is for your Excellency's private use, you may prefer to take away the key, since the workmen have nothing more to do there.'

'Thank you,' Maria answered.

'The servants need not know that the door is a real one,' observed Schmidt.

It chanced that Maria did not much like the maid

she had at that time, but as the woman was clever she meant to keep her. It struck her that there was certainly no reason why she need know that her mistress could go from her own rooms to the chapel without being seen, if she wished to say her prayers there in private. As for the chapel itself, its outer door was formerly kept locked, and Montalto had given her a key to it when they had been married. The reason for keeping it shut was that the altar contained a reliquary in which was preserved a comparatively large relic of the Cross, already very long an heirloom in the family. No doubt Schmidt knew this, as he seemed to know everything else about his hereditary employers — or masters, as he would have called them. When one family of men has served another faithfully, those who serve possess a sort of universal knowledge of such details which no ordinary servant could acquire in half a lifetime.

Maria left the boudoir, after putting the key into the small new black Morocco bag, which had taken the place of the rather shabby grey velvet one she had used so long. When she came to live in the palace she meant to keep the key in her writing-desk.

'The Count wishes me to be here when he comes,' she said as they passed through the great ball-room. 'He writes that you will engage servants and see to everything. Our old butler and coachman have never left me. Do you think I may keep them still? I wish to do nothing, however, which does not agree with your instructions.'

'My master's orders,' said Schmidt, 'are to meet your Excellency's wishes in every respect. He will not even bring his own man with him, and I have orders to engage a valet for him. If you will tell me what day will be convenient for you to move, I will see that everything is ready.'

'The Count writes that he will arrive on Sunday afternoon,' Maria answered. 'I had better be here two days before that. I will come on Friday morning.'

'On Friday?' repeated the steward with a little surprise.

'Yes. Are you superstitious, Signor Orlando?'

She really could not call him 'Signor Schmidt'; it was too absurd; yet he was of Italian nationality.

'No, your Excellency, I am not. But most people are. If the Signora Contessa would be kind enough to call me simply Schmidt,' he added with a little hesitation, 'it is an easy name to remember, and does not occur in Ariosto's poem.'

She looked at him rather curiously, but she smiled at his last words.

'Very well,' she said. 'As you like.'

'It was my mother,' he explained, blushing shyly. 'She is very fond of Ariosto, and she insisted on christening me Orlando. On Friday next everything will be ready to receive your Excellency and the young gentleman. Shall I provide for moving the Signora Contessa's things?'

'I shall be much obliged,' said Maria, who was glad that she was to be spared all trouble.

She went home feeling as if she were in a painful dream, from which she must awake before long. In the afternoon, when Agostino was out with Leone and the little house was quiet, she went to the telephone and asked for the number of the Palazzo Boccapaduli. She got it, and was answered by a man-servant. She inquired when Castiglione would be at home, but was told that he was not staying in the house. It was the only address she knew, so she asked where he lived. The servant did not know, but would go and find out, if she would hold the communication.

A few moments later the voice that spoke to her was Oderisio's, and he asked with whom he was speaking, and on being told, at once inquired if it was she who wanted Castiglione's address. Yes, it was she; did he know it? Yes, he did; and he gave it. Had Castiglione a telephone? No, but he might be at the officers' club; did she wish the number of that? No, she did not care for it. Thank you, and good-bye.

At first she was a little annoyed that young Boccapaduli should know she wanted Castiglione's address. But presently, as she went back to the sitting-room, it struck her that it was just as well. Oderisio would understand that she was not seeing Baldassare often, since she did not know his address after he had been in Rome nearly a month.

She wrote him a short note, which anybody might have read, begging him to come and see her on the following Thursday after half-past two. She addressed it and stamped it, she put on her hat without calling

her maid, and she went out to post it in the letter-box at the corner of the railway station.

She was sure of herself, she thought, and she believed she had earned the right to receive Castiglione once again, because she was bravely resolved never to see him alone after she returned to her husband's house. That resolution had formed itself at the instant when she had told Leone that Montalto was coming back, and she had not wavered in it since, in spite of what she had felt when he had brought her the fallen parasol in the Villa. The greatest and most enduring resolutions in life are rarely made after mature consideration, still less at those times of spiritual exaltation which are too often self-suggested, and sought for the sake of a half-sensuous, half-mysterious agitation of the nerves that is far from healthy. People who are not morbid and are in great trouble generally see the right course rather suddenly and unexpectedly; if they are good they follow it, if they are bad they do not, but if they attempt a careful and subtle examination of conscience they often come to grief. It is hopeless to analyse processes in which conscience and mind are involved together until we can find a constant coefficient for humanity's ever-varying strength and weakness.

During more than a month Maria had acted and thought under the domination of one idea; she had need of strength, but she had not felt the want of advice or help. She knew better than the harsh old Capuchin, better even than Monsignor Saracinesca, what she must do, and as for help, no living man or

woman could have given her any, unless it were Castiglione himself. She had accepted what was laid upon her, and when she went at early morning to kneel at the altar rail in the small oratory, she prayed for strength and for nothing else.

So far it had come to her and had borne her through more than any one who knew her could have guessed; and when she sent for Castiglione, to see him once more and for the last time, she was far from thinking that she did so from any weakness. It seemed only just, for no man could have acted more honourably and courageously than he, and he had a right to know from her own lips what she meant to do.

He came, knowing what was before him, and meaning to do what he could to spare her all pain and useless emotion. More and more often now he called her a saint in his thoughts, and his love for her was sometimes very like veneration.

She had taken care that Leone should not be in the house that afternoon, not because she had any thought of concealing Castiglione's visit from the child, but out of consideration for the man himself. She knew only too well what he felt when he saw the boy's blue eyes and his short and thick brown hair.

He came in civilian's dress, lest his brilliant uniform should attract attention from a distance as he entered the house where she lived. His hand met hers quietly and the two lovers looked into each other's earnest eyes. By a common impulse they sat down in the places they had generally taken when they had met in

the same room before, on opposite sides of the empty fireplace.

'I know why you have sent for me,' began Baldassare, very gently. 'May I try to tell you? It may be a little easier.'

Maria did not attempt to speak for a few moments, and he waited.

'No,' she said at last, quite steadily. 'You could not tell me just what I have to say to you. I asked you to come because you have been so very brave, so very generous ——'

She choked a little, but recovered herself quickly.

'It is only just that I should tell you so before we say good-bye,' she went on. 'I knew I could trust you — but oh, I did not know how much!'

'I have only tried to do my duty,' he answered.

'You have done it like the brave man you are,' said Maria.

'Please ——' he spoke to interrupt her.

'Yes,' she went on, not heeding him. 'We may not meet again, we two, alone like this. One of us may die before that is possible. So I shall say all that is in my thoughts, if I can. You most know all, you must understand all, even if it hurts very much. My husband is going to take me back altogether; he has forgiven me; he asks me to be his wife again. Can I refuse?'

She had not meant to put the question to him, and he knew that she expected no answer. Her tone showed that. But he would not let her think that in his heart he rebelled against the knife.

'No,' he said very slowly. 'I would not have you refuse what he asks. It would be neither right nor just.'

In spite of the almost intolerable pain she was suffering, a glow of wonder rose in her eyes; and there was no shadow of doubt to dim it. At his worst, in the old days, he had always told the truth.

'God bless you for that!' she cried suddenly, and then her voice dropped low. 'You have travelled far on the good road since we last talked together,' she said. 'Further than I.'

He shook his head gravely.

'No,' he answered. 'You have led me, and I have followed.'

'We have journeyed together,' she said, 'though we have been apart. We may be separated, as we must be now, to the end, but we cannot be divided any more. I wanted to tell you something else too, this last time, and you have made it easy to say it, and altogether right. It is this. I do not take back one word of what I said to you and wrote to you before I knew Montalto was coming home. I do not want you to think that I have changed my mind, or that the life we were going to lead seems to me now one little bit less good and true and honourable than it seemed to me that first time we talked together here.'

'Do you think I doubted you for a moment?'

'You might. But it is only that other things have changed. We have not, and I know we never shall, and in the end we are to meet where there is peace, and

somehow it will be right then, and we shall all three understand that it is. Can you believe that too?'

'I wish to. I shall try to. If anything could make a man believe in God, it is the love of such a woman as you are.'

'You have my love,' Maria answered. 'And some day you will believe as I do, but in your own way, and we shall be together where there are no partings. Yes, I am sure that we could have lived as we meant to, and could have helped each other to rise higher and higher, far above these dying bodies of ours. But we shall reach the good end more quickly by our suffering than we ever could by our happiness.'

'That may be,' said Castiglione, 'but one thing is far more certain: we must part now, cost what it may.'

'Cost what it may!' She pressed her hands to her eyes and was silent a little while.

'Has he spoken of Leone in his letters?' Castiglione asked after a time, in a tone that was almost timid.

Maria dropped her hands upon her knees at once and met his look.

'Not to me,' she answered. 'But he gave orders about the child's room to the steward he sent from Montalto. Everything was to be arranged for Leone just as I wished. That was all.'

'Will he be kind to the boy, do you think?' asked Castiglione, very low.

'I know he will try to be,' Maria answered generously.

That was her greatest cause for fear in the future; it was the stumbling-block she saw in the way of Mont-

alto's wish to take her back; but although he might treat the boy coldly, and avoid seeing him, and insist that he should be sent away to a school as soon as he was old enough, she believed that her husband would be just, and she was sure she should leave him if he were not. There was one sacrifice which should not be exacted of her: she would not tamely submit to see her child ill-treated. At that she would rebel, and she would be dangerous for any man to face.

'Yes,' she repeated, 'I know he will try to be kind.'

Castiglione merely nodded and said nothing, but Maria saw his looks; and she was not all a saint yet, for with the sight came the thrill of fierce elemental motherhood, rejoicing in the strength of the man who could kill. There was nothing very saintly about that, and she knew it.

'We must not think of such things,' she said, as she felt the deep vibrations grow faint and die away. 'Let us take it for granted that my husband will be very just. That is all I have a right to ask of him.'

Again Castiglione bent his head in assent. Then both were silent for a long time.

'Am I never to know anything of your life after this?' he asked suddenly.

'You will know what every one may know,' she said.

'Nothing more? Only to hear that you are ill or well? Never to be told whether he really does what he can to make it bearable for you? May I not have news of you sometimes? Through Giuliana Parenzo, for instance? Is it to be always outer darkness?'

'Giuliana will know what you all will know, and no more,' Maria answered. 'If I must not tell you what I suffer, do you think I would tell her? I shall not tell myself!' There was one bitter note in that phrase. 'You will always know something that no one else can,' she went on, and her voice softened. 'And so shall I, and that must be enough for us. Is it so little?'

'Ah, no! It is all of us two that really lives!'

She heard the deeper tone of rising passion not far away, and she interrupted him.

'It is all I shall have for the rest of my life,' she said, and she rose suddenly and held out her hand, meaning that it was time to part.

'Already?' he asked, not leaving his seat yet, and looking up beseechingly.

'Yes,' she said. 'You must not stay. We have told each other what had to be said, and to say more would not be right. Less would not have been just to you.'

He also had risen now and stood before her, meaning to be as brave as she, cost what it might.

'We are only human,' she went on, 'only a man and a woman alone together, and if I let you stay longer this one last time, there may be some word, some look, between us that we shall regret. Though Diego is not here yet, I became his wife again in real truth on the day I accepted his forgiveness; and as his wife, no word to you shall pass my lips that he might not hear. We have tried to do right, you and I; if we have not failed altogether, God help us to do better! If we did wrong in those few sweet days, then God pardon us! I thank

you from my soul for being brave and true when you might have dragged me down. For the past we have forgiven each other, as we hope to be forgiven. And so good-bye. I would bless you, if I dared; I can ask a blessing for you, and it will come; I am sure it will. If I die first, I shall wait for you somewhere, and you will come. If you are taken before me, wait for me! Good-bye, good-bye, good-bye!'

Her voice was sweet and steady to the very end, but when he took her hand at last it was cold, and it quivered in his. He began to lift it to his lips, but it resisted him gently, and he obeyed its resistance.

'Good-bye,' he said, as well as he could.

But she hardly heard the syllables; and then, in a moment, he was gone.

CHAPTER XII

The day had come, and Maria was waiting alone for her husband in one of the great rooms of the Palazzo Montalto. She had told Leone that she would send for him when he was wanted, and he was thoughtfully consoling himself for not being allowed to stay with her by polishing the barrel of his tin rifle with his tooth-brush and tooth powder, and he had the double satisfaction of seeing the gun shine beautifully and of making the hated instrument useless for its proper purpose. And meanwhile he wondered what his papa would be like, and whether he should always hate him.

But Maria walked restlessly up and down the drawing-room, and her head felt a little light. Now and then she stopped near one of the open windows and listened for the sound of wheels below and looked at her watch; and when she saw that it was still early, she breathed more freely at first and sat down, trying to rest and collect herself; but it was like thinking of resting ten minutes before execution, and she rose almost directly and began to walk again.

In her deep mourning she looked smaller and slighter in the great room than in the simpler surroundings she had left. She had indeed grown a little thinner of late, but she was not ill, nor even as tired as she had

expected to be at the crucial moment. The people who feel most are not those whose nerves go to pieces in trouble, and who get absolute rest then by the doctor's orders; they are more often those who are condemned to bear much, for the very reason that they cannot break down. In the age of torture the weak fainted or died and felt no more, but the strong were conscious and suffered to the end, and that was very long in coming. Yet no one ever pities the strong people.

Leone had told his mother that the white patch in her hair near her left temple had grown so much larger of late that three of his fingers only just covered it, and he had kindly offered to ink it for her; and she was somewhat thinner and a little paler than she had been a month earlier. But that was all there was to show that she had lived through weeks of distress. Montalto would scarcely notice the white lock at first, and her figure looked a shade more perfect for being slighter. She had never been a beauty, but she had more grace and charm than ever, and she was only seven-and-twenty. Giuliana Parenzo was much handsomer, but few men would have hesitated between her and Maria, who had that nameless something in every easy movement, in every lingering smile, in each soft tone of her warm voice, that wakes the man in men, as early spring stirs the life in the earth, deep down and out of sight. She did not understand what she had, and for years she had lived so much away from the lighter side of her own world that she had almost forgotten how the men used to gather round her and crowd

upon each other instinctively to come nearer to her in the first year of her marriage, as they never did for Giuliana. She used to notice it then, and she had a laugh and a quick answer for each that showed no preference for any, and maddened them all till they were almost ready to quarrel with each other; but she had been very young then, and she had not understood, till one more reckless than the rest, the very one she trusted too much because she loved him only and too well, had laid waste for ever her fair young being, half-wrecked his own life, and broken the heart of an honest man.

And this honest man had forgiven her, for love of her; he too, and he more than any, had felt that her smile, and her breath, and her touch could drive him mad; and now that he was coming back, the minutes were passing quickly — a very few were left — still fewer — the last but one — the very last, as she heard his carriage roll in through the great arched entrance almost directly under her feet.

The doors were open beyond the drawing-room towards the ante-chamber; one door only was shut between that and the outer hall where the butler and footmen in deep mourning were waiting for their master.

She heard it opened, a once familiar voice asked in a formal tone where she was, and a servant answered. Then came the well-remembered step. In the painful tension of her hearing she heard it far away, even on the soft carpet, more clearly than she had ever heard it on tiled floor or marble pavement.

She steadied herself for a moment against the corner of a heavy table; and then the drawing-room door, which had been open, was shut, and Montalto was in the room, grey and hollow-eyed, coming towards her with thin hands outstretched in greeting. By a miracle of strength she went forward and met them with her own; met his eyes, and let him kiss her. She sank into a chair then, and he was close beside her, trying to speak in his old formal way, though he could hardly control his voice.

He seemed dreadfully changed, and when she saw him clearly a sharp pang of pity wrung her heart. His hair and pointed beard were quite grey, his colourless cheeks were painfully thin, and his hollow eyes burned with a feverish fire; he stopped speaking suddenly, in the middle of a sentence, as if he were paralysed, and his lips were parched, but his burning gaze did not waver from her face. She was a little frightened.

'You are ill!' she cried. 'Let me get you something!'

She half rose, but his thin hand caught her and held her back.

'No,' he said hoarsely, 'I am not ill. It is only that — that I have not — seen you — for so long!'

The words came in gasps; the last ones broke out in a frantic sob. She was moved, and willing to be touched, and though she had felt the old physical repulsion for him again the instant he came near her, she took one of his hands now and held it on her knees and stroked it kindly.

'Diego!'

She did not know what to say, so she pronounced his name as softly and as affectionately as she could. But she had not spoken yet, and at the sound of her sweet voice the man broke down completely.

'Oh, Maria, Maria!' he moaned, drawing her hand to his chest and rocking himself a little. 'It was all a dreadful dream — and I have got you back again — Maria ——'

The over-strained, over-wrenched nerves gave way and he broke into a flood of tears; the drops ran down the furrows of his thin cheeks and his grey beard and wet her hand as he pressed passionate kisses upon it, rocking himself over it and sobbing convulsively.

Maria had lived through a good deal of suffering and some moments that now seemed too horrible to have been real, but she had never had any emotion forced upon her from without that had been harder to bear calmly than what she felt now.

If anything could strengthen the physical repulsion that made her shrink from her husband's touch it was the sight of his unmanly tears and the sound of his hysterical sobbing. If anything could make it more difficult to hide her loathing it was the knowledge that she had wronged him and that she owed him gratitude for his free forgiveness. She would much rather have had him turn upon her like a maniac and strike her than be obliged to watch the painful heaving of his thin, bent shoulders, and feel the hot tears that ran down upon her hands.

It was so unutterably disgusting that she felt a terribly

strong impulse to throw him off, to scream out that she would not take his forgiveness at any price, that he must let her go back and lead her own life with her child, as she had lived for so many years. He would suffer a little more, but what was a little more or less to a man who seemed half mad?

Then the wave of pity rushed back, and that was even worse. It was the pity a delicate woman feels for some wretched living thing half killed in an accident, so crushed and torn that the mere thought of touching it makes her shrink back and shiver to her very feet because the suffering creature is not her own. If it were hers but ever so little, if it were her dog, she would feel nothing but the instant womanly need of saving it if she could, of helping it to die easily if she could not.

Maria's hand shrank from the scalding tears and writhed under the man's frantic kisses. She shut her eyes and threw back her head; her face was drawn and white, and she prayed as she had never prayed in her life, for strength to bear all that was before her.

It had seemed just possible, because she had imposed it upon herself as her honourable duty, and because the husband she remembered had been before all things proud, and as full of a certain exaggerated dignity and self-respect as Spaniards sometimes are, though he was only half-Spanish. She had felt him coming back to her from far away, like a dark instrument of fate, to which she must give herself up body and mind, if she hoped to expiate her sin to the end. It had seemed hard, even dreadfully hard; but this was worse. Instead

of the erect and formal figure and the grave dark face that had a certain strength in it which she could at least respect — instead of that, it was a broken-down man who came to her, prematurely old, a neurasthenic invalid no better than a hysterical woman, palsied with unmanly emotion, lacking all strength, self-respect and dignity, and without even a rag of vanity that might have passed for pride.

She was not stronger in her hands than other women, but she was sure that it would be easy to throw him from her; he would fall in a heap on the carpet, and would lie there helpless and sobbing. As she felt the instant contempt for his weakness, she prayed the more for courage to humble her own strength to it; and her eyes were still shut tight and her face was white and drawn. This was but the beginning of what must last for years, ten, twenty, as long as he lived, or until she died of it.

The future stretched out before her in length without end; she forgot everything else, and did not know that the tears ceased to flow and presently dried, nor that Montalto drew back from her into his own chair as the storm subsided within him. His voice woke her from the dream of pain to come.

'I trust you will forgive my first emotion, my dear,' he said with all his characteristic formality. 'I see that I have made a painful impression on you. I shall not allow it to occur again.'

It was such a quick relief to see him more like himself, that she had almost a sensation of pleasure,

and she smiled faintly while she tried to say something.

'No — please — I'm so sorry ——'

She could find no connected sentence. He rose and began to walk up and down before her, making half a dozen steps each way, a shadowy figure in black, passing and repassing before her.

'I believe that I have made everything clear in my letters,' he said, and then he glanced at her from time to time without pausing in his walk while he talked. 'I shall not repeat anything I have written, but there are one or two other matters of which I must speak to you before we begin life again together, Maria. They need not be mentioned more than once either. It is better to be done with everything which may be in the least painful to you as soon as possible.'

In spite of the formal manner, there were kind inflections in his tone. It seemed marvellous that he should have recovered himself so soon, and it was only possible because such exhibitions of weakness were not really natural to him. Maria had felt relieved as soon as he had begun to talk quietly, and when he left his seat, her physical repugnance to him began to subside within its old limits. But at the same time she felt a vague fear that he was going to speak of Leone.

'You have shown remarkable tact, my dear,' he went on, 'and you will have no difficulty in making your friends understand that our long separation has been principally due to my mother's condition, and that since she is gone' — his voice sank a little — 'we have

resumed our married life. This will be easy, no doubt. May I ask, without indiscretion, who your most intimate friends are?'

'Giuliana Parenzo is my only intimate friend,' Maria answered at once.

'I am glad of that,' said Montalto, approving. 'She is a thoroughly nice woman in all ways, and everybody respects her. Are there any others whom you see often?'

'I have dined a good many times with the Campodonico and the Saracinesca and the Boccapaduli — sometimes with the Trasmondo. I have never gone to balls. On the whole, I have tried to be on friendly terms with most of the people who have children of Leone's age.'

She had boldly brought forward the question which she thought he meant to reach, and she waited for his reply. But he would not take it up.

'Leone,' he repeated, in a musing tone. 'Friends for Leone. Yes, yes — that was quite right. I will see him by and by.'

'He is waiting to be called,' said Maria quickly, for she was anxious to get over the difficult moment as soon as possible.

'Presently,' answered Montalto. 'I have one or two things to say while we are alone. First, as to your friends, I wish you to understand that even if there are some whom I do not know, they shall all be welcome here. They will be the more welcome because they stood by my wife when she was in trouble.'

He put a little emphasis on the words, his figure had straightened and he held his head high. She understood the great generosity of what he said.

'Thank you, Diego,' she said in a low voice. 'You are very good.'

'There is only one person who shall not come here,' he continued, in a tone that was suddenly hard.

Maria almost started, but controlled herself; he could only mean Castiglione.

'Who is it?' she asked, as steadily as she could.

'Teresa Crescenzi,' answered Montalto, turning rather sharply. 'I beg you never to receive her. She spoke against my mother, and I will not have her in the house.'

Maria actually laughed, though a little nervously.

'She is no friend of mine,' she said. 'I do not care to see her.'

'You need not quarrel with her, my dear, if you meet. I shall take the responsibility on myself, and I shall be careful to let her know that it is I who forbid her my house.'

He was not a short man, and when he drew himself up he looked tall. Maria no longer felt that she could throw him to the floor if he took her hand.

'I have not many real friends here now,' he said, more gently. 'One whom I especially esteem is Monsignor Saracinesca. Do you ever see him?'

'I saw him not long ago, and I sometimes meet him at his father's house. We are on good terms.'

'That is very pleasant,' Montalto answered. 'I shall often ask him here, if you do not object.'

'I shall always be glad to see him,' returned Maria. 'But, please, Diego, do not consult me about such things. I am very deeply conscious of your generosity in all ways, and this house is yours, not mine.'

'It is ours,' said Montalto, 'except for Teresa Crescenzi. I do not wish you to think of it in any other way. And that brings me to the last point. May I inquire whether you have found yourself in any — how shall I say? — in any financial straits in which my fortune can be of service to you?'

You may judge a man of the world's wisdom by the sort of wife he chooses, but the test of a gentleman is the way he treats his wife. Maria was profoundly touched by her husband's question. She rose from her seat and went close to him, overcoming her repulsion easily for the moment as she took his hand and spoke.

'No, I have made no debts. But I have no words to thank you for your kindness. I shall try to deserve it.'

'It is only what I owe to my wife,' Montalto answered, and he bent over her hand with as much ceremony as if there had been twenty people in the room.

'I have something to tell you, too,' she said. 'You ought to know it. Baldassare del Castiglione has come back to Rome. We have met alone, and we have agreed never to see each other again — except as we may chance to find ourselves in a friend's house at the same time.'

Montalto could not help dropping her hand as soon as she pronounced Castiglione's name, but his face changed little.

'I daresay you were wise to see him once,' he replied, a trifle coldly. 'We need not refer to him again.'

She could not have expected more than that, but when he had answered she was a little sorry that she had spoken at all. He would willingly have trusted her without that explanation.

With an evident wish to change the subject, he began to ask questions about the apartment, inquiring how she liked it, and whether she had found Schmidt efficient in carrying out her wishes.

'Very,' she answered to the last question. 'He is a wonderful man.'

'Yes,' Montalto assented coldly, 'in some ways he is an extraordinary young man.'

There was something more reserved in the tone than in the words, but Maria was very far from being intimate enough with her husband yet to ask whether Schmidt had any fault or weakness that justified his master's evident doubts about him. She wondered what the trouble might be.

'Shall we go and see Leone now?' Montalto suggested. 'On the way you can show me what you have done to the house. You have not ruined me in furniture,' he added with a smile, as he looked round the rather empty drawing-room.

'I left as much as possible to you,' Maria answered.

She was thinking of Leone, and she already saw before her the sturdy little blue-eyed boy with his thick and short brown hair. They went on through the house

to the door of Maria's boudoir, at the end of the great ball-room.

'That is where I have installed myself,' she said, pointing to it and turning to the left, towards the masked door that led to the living rooms in the other wing.

'Yes, I remember,' answered Montalto. 'And this is your dressing-room, I suppose,' he added as they walked on. 'And this used to be your bedroom.'

'Yes,' said Maria steadily. 'That is the door of my bedroom.'

Leone's was the next, and in a moment they were standing in a flood of afternoon light, and Maria bent down and kissed the small boy's hair because he would not turn up his cheek to her, being very intent on examining Montalto's face. But Maria dared not look at her husband just then.

'Here we are at last, dear,' she said as well as she could, still bending over him.

To some extent she could trust the child's manners, for she had brought him up herself, but her heart beat fast during the little silence before Montalto spoke, and she wondered what his tone would be much more than what he was going to say, for she felt sure that the words would not be unkind.

Montalto held out his hand, and Leone took it slowly. He had never been kissed by a man, and did not imagine that his newly-introduced papa could be expected to kiss him. This was fortunate, for Montalto had not the least intention of doing so.

'Can you ride yet?' he asked, with a smile.

'No,' Leone answered, but his face changed instantly. 'Not yet.'

'I will teach you, my boy, and as soon as you can trot and gallop nicely you shall have a good horse of your own.'

Leone flushed with pleasure, a healthy red that was good to see.

'Oh, how splendid!' he cried, and his blue eyes lit up with happiness. 'Really, really?'

'Yes, really.'

'When shall I begin?'

'To-morrow morning.'

'Hurrah!' yelled the small boy. 'At last!'

Maria could have cried out too, or laughed, or burst into tears from sheer relief. Montalto had unconsciously received one of those happy inspirations which turn the mingling currents of meeting lives; and Leone was already astride of a stick, prancing round the room on an imaginary horse, shouting out the tune of the Italian royal march and sabring the air to right and left with the first thing he happened to pick up. It chanced to be the tooth-brush with which he had been polishing his tin gun.

Montalto looked pleased, and Leone pranced towards him on the stick and pretended to rein in a fiery steed before his papa, saluting with the tooth-brush sabre in correct cavalry fashion.

'Viva Papa!' he bawled. 'Viva Papa!'

Montalto, who rarely smiled, could not help laughing now. Maria could hardly believe her senses, for she

had dreaded most of all moments the one in which the two were to meet. But now her husband suddenly looked younger. He was thin, indeed, to the verge of emaciation, his hands were shrunken and transparent, his beard was quite grey, his eyes were hollow; but there was no feverish fire in them, his face was not colourless, and there was life in his movements. Maria wondered whether it were humanly possible that he should not only be kind to her child but should actually like him, and perhaps love him some day.

At all events what had happened had made it easier for her than she had dared to expect, and though nothing could efface the painful impression of her meeting with him, what had now taken place certainly made a great difference.

During dinner he talked quietly about Rome and politics and old friends, and if she saw his eyes fixed upon her now and then with an expression that made her nervous, there was still the broad table between them, and he looked away almost directly.

Afterwards he smoked Spanish cigarettes, taking them to pieces and rolling them again in thin French paper, and he went on talking; but as the hour advanced he said less and less, and his cigarette went out very often, till at last he rose, saying that it was late, and he kissed her hand ceremoniously and left her.

'Good-night,' she said, just before he disappeared through the door.

He bent his head a little but did not answer.

An hour later she had dismissed her maid and sat in

a small easy-chair in her boudoir under a shaded light; she was trying to read, in the hope of growing sleepy. She wore a thin silk dressing-gown, wide open at the throat and showing a little simple white lace; her dark hair was taken up in a loose knot rather low down at the back of her neck, as she had always done it at bedtime ever since she had been a young girl. Her bare feet were half hidden in a pair of rather shabby little grey velvet slippers without heel or heel-piece, for the spring night was warm. She was trying to read.

She thought some one knocked softly at the door; she started in her chair and dropped the book, while her hand went up to her throat to gather the silk folds and hide the lace underneath. She could not speak.

Another knock, quite distinct this time, and followed by a question in her husband's voice.

'May I come in?'

An instant's pause, and she closed her eyes to say two words.

'Come in.'

PART II

THE COUNTESS OF MONTALTO

CHAPTER XIII

The Romans approved of Montalto's return. The reason why any civilised society continues to exist is that the majority of decent people look upon marriage seriously, and consider it as a permanent bond, spiritual or legal, or both. In such conservative countries as admit divorce, the respectable part of society looks upon it as a last resource in extreme cases, and no sensible citizen should regard it as anything else. When it has taken place, the society to which the two divorced persons belong decides which of them was in the right, and that one is received as cordially as ever; the other is treated coldly, and is sometimes turned out.

But there is no divorce law in Italy, and a civil marriage is as indissoluble in the eyes of the Italian state as a religious one is under the rules of the Catholic Church. There is such a thing as separation by law, but it gives neither party a right to marry again; it concerns the administration of property and the guardianship of children, but nothing else, and the parties may agree to unite again without any further ceremony.

Maria and her husband had never gone through the form of being legally separated, though they had taken towards each other the relative positions of separated husband and wife. Maria's sufficient independent for-

tune enabled her to decline any subsidy from Montalto, and she had quitted his house after he left her; she had also kept the child. The two had voluntarily placed themselves where the law would probably have placed them, and society had been grateful to Montalto for having avoided the open scandal of any legal procedure against his wife; the more so, as it had chosen to take Maria's side, on the principle that absent friends are always in the wrong.

But society was very glad to consider both Montalto and his wife in the right, now that he had come back quietly, at the very end of a season; and no objections were raised against the perfectly innocent fiction of his having stayed away from Rome many years to take care of his mother. It was a satisfaction to see such an important couple reconciled again and living peaceably together; everybody had something to repent of in life, and most people had something to conceal; Maria had repented and Montalto had covered up the spot on his honour, with as much tact and dignity as were respectively consistent with a stained escutcheon and a contrite heart; and it was really much more proper that Maria di Montalto, whose husband was an authentic Count of the Empire, should live in the great palace, instead of in a little apartment in the Via San Martino, and should drive in a big carriage behind a pair of huge black horses, in the shadow of tremendously imposing mourning liveries, than go about in a small phaeton drawn by a pair of hired nags, or even in a little brougham with one horse and no footman at all, as she had some-

times been seen to do; it was much more proper and appropriate. Why should any one make a fuss because a small boy called Leone Silani di Montalto had blue eyes instead of brown or black ones? Was it admissible that not one of the Montalto ancestors, since the First Crusade, should have had blue eyes, to account for Leone's? Was nature to be allowed no latitude in such little matters? And so forth; and so on; and more to the same effect, and to the credit of Diego, Maria, and Leone di Montalto, happily reunited in their own home. These things were said without a smile by such excellent elderly people as the Princess Campodonico and the Duchess of Trasmondo, the good and beautiful old Princess Saracinesca, the whole Boccapaduli family, and all the secondary social luminaries which reflect the light of the great fixed ones round which they revolve. There had been a conspicuous gap at the banquet of the Roman Olympians for years; it was once more filled by those who had a right to it, and everything was for the best in the best of all possible worlds, as Candide's tutor was the first to observe. So far as the Montalto family was concerned, the truth of the assertion was amply proved by the fact that Montalto himself was teaching Leone to ride, in the Villa Borghese. Three or four times a week you might meet him there in the early morning hours on a wonderful Andalusian mare he had brought from Spain, with the boy at his side, red in the face, fearless, and perfectly happy on a pony with a leading rein.

Castiglione saw them once from a distance, coming

towards him, but he jumped his horse over the stiff fence into the meadow, crossed quickly, and was over into the ring again on the other side and out of the Villa by Porta Pinciana before the pair recognised him, for Montalto was rather near-sighted and Leone was so much interested in his lesson that even the uniform of the Piedmont Lancers no longer had great attractions for him. After that Castiglione gave up exercising his horses in the Villa.

The fact of riding a real animal, that could move its tail, had destroyed in a day all Leone's bright illusions of toy guns and tin helmets. A boy who could ride was half a man already, and even half a man must be above the suspicion of playing with sham weapons. After his third ride in the Villa, Leone solemnly presented his whole armoury to the children of the porter downstairs, and though his room seemed very bare for a day or two, he found consolation in sitting astride of a chair, conscientiously repeating to himself and practising the instructions he had received from Montalto.

'Toes in! Grip the saddle with your knees, not with your calves! Elbows to your sides! Your heels down, in a line with your head and your shoulder! Hold the bridle lightly, don't hold on by it! Head straight, not thrown back, nor forward either! Look before you, between the pony's ears!'

As he repeated each well-remembered precept Leone studied his position to be sure that he was really obeying the order. It was ever so much more real, even on a chair, than prancing about on his feet, astride of a stick,

with a tin sabre, yelling the Royal March; and it was incomparably more dignified.

Maria came to his room one afternoon and found him at his self-imposed exercise. She paused on the threshold, before he knew that she was there, and she watched him with a rather sad smile. He was so tremendously strong and vital, and she felt so subdued and weary! It seemed impossible that he should be her child. Yet hers he was.

He ordered himself to sit very straight, and in the pause during which he made sure of having been very attentive, he heard her and turned his head. He laughed a little shyly at being caught.

'It's not play,' he hastened to say. 'It's practice. I go over everything papa tells me, and I do it very carefully. Then he says I learn very fast, but he doesn't know I practise. Of course, if he asked me, I'd tell him. It's not wrong not to tell him, if he doesn't ask me, is it, mama?'

'No, dear,' Maria answered, and she bent down and kissed the boy's forehead.

'Because I like to surprise him by doing it better than he expects,' he went on. 'Then he smiles, and I like him when he smiles.'

'I think you always like him, my dear,' said his mother. 'Don't you?'

'Yes. But I wasn't going to, though!' The young jaw thrust itself forward viciously. 'I thought I was going to hate him when he came in here with you that day. I did!'

'You must try not to hate any one,' said Maria; and again she kissed his forehead.

'Oh, that's all very well, mama!' retorted the boy. 'Why do you always kiss my forehead now?' he asked suddenly. 'It used to be the back of my neck, you know, just here!'

He laughed, and put up his hand behind his head to the spot where the short hair was always trying to curl. But Maria had turned away to inspect his tooth-brush, as she often did after she had discovered the use he had made of one for cleaning his toy gun. She did not answer his question.

'Oh, you needn't look at it, mama,' he said, watching her. 'At least, not till I have a real gun. Besides,' he added rather mournfully, 'I brush my teeth now.'

'Oh — I'm glad to hear it!'

'Yes,' Leone answered, with his hands in his pockets. 'You see, papa does — so I suppose I must, too.'

'But I always told you to!' Maria could not help smiling. 'Was not that enough, child?'

'Oh, yes, of course. But it's different. I want to be like papa.'

Maria had not been prepared for this speech, and the smile faded from her face.

'You could not do better,' she said gravely. 'He is an honest gentleman, if ever there was one.'

'I'd give anything to look like him, too. But I suppose that's impossible. I'd like to have a dark, grave face, like his, and at the same time to look so smart — most of all on horseback.'

'You cannot change your looks, dear,' Maria managed to say, and she pretended to continue her inspection of the room, lest he should see her face just then.

The world was very hard to understand, she thought, and later, when she was alone, she pondered on this new mystery. It still seemed impossible that the least likely of all things should have happened: that Leone should have developed a whole-hearted, boyish admiration for Montalto was strange enough, but that Montalto should apparently have taken a real liking to Leone, and something more, was past her comprehension. It was almost too much, and a deep, unacknowledged feminine instinct was ready to rise up against it, though all her conscience and intelligence told her that she should be grateful to her husband for the large forgiveness he bestowed upon her in every act of kindness to the boy.

He had changed quickly since his return, and she sometimes found it hard to believe that he had come back to her looking like the wreck of a man, that his tears had run down like a nervous woman's, scalding her hands till she had felt contempt for his unmanly weakness.

Certain people have what may be called dramatic constitutions and faces; a few hours of anxiety or pain make havoc of their looks; when others would merely look tired, they become haggard, their cheeks fall in, their eyes grow hollow; in a fortnight they grow thin till they seem shadowy. But when the pain is over, or the anxiety is relieved, their normal appearance returns with amazing rapidity. In three or four weeks after he had come home, Montalto was his old self again,

saving his prematurely grey hair and beard; but even they no longer made him look old now that his still young face had filled out again and recovered its normal colour. He was once more a grave, dark, erect and rather handsome man, apparently endowed with a strong will of his own, and undoubtedly imbued with an almost exaggerated sense of his dignity. He was again the husband Maria had married nine years ago, and he had blotted out of his memory all that had happened from then till now.

He was almost the same again; and so was Maria herself. If he had remained as much changed as he had seemed to be at first, she might possibly have deluded herself with the idea that he was not really the same man, after all, so that he was now her real husband and she had dreamed all the rest. But even such an imaginary alleviation as that was denied her. He was only too really the same in all ways; she quivered at his gentlest touch and writhed under his loving caress, and presently she wondered why he never felt that she loathed him, even if he could not see it in her face.

A villainous idea suggested itself. Perhaps he both felt and saw her repugnance; perhaps his kindness was all a cruel comedy, his affection for Leone a diabolical deception; perhaps he was revenging himself in his own way, and delighting inwardly in the unspeakable suffering he inflicted.

But the thought was too unbalanced to sustain itself. According to his lights, Maria was sure that he was a good man. Don Ippolito Saracinesca knew human nature

well, and could not have been deceived for years in one whom he called his friend. Diego di Montalto was not a monster of cruelty; his love was real, his forgiveness was real, his liking for the boy he might so naturally have detested was real too — it was all awfully real. God in heaven would not have expected her to submit herself body and mind to be tormented by a wicked man for the rest of her life, in vengeance for one fault. No, her husband was a good man, who had been generous beyond words; he had come home to take her back before the whole world, defying it to speak evil against his honoured wife, he had come home to be her husband and her child's father. And when he touched her she trembled and felt sick; but this was her just expiation, and she must bear it as well as she could, and hide her horror of him till she died of it. Even that would not come soon. She had not a dramatic organisation like his, and she could be made to bear a great deal before the end. She would have been a good patient for the tormentors in older times, for she would not have fainted soon, or died, and felt nothing more. She was very quiet, a little subdued, and there was sometimes a startled, haunted look in her eyes, but that was all; she ate enough, she went about her occupations, she wrote letters to Giuliana and others, she looked after Leone, she even slept as much as was necessary, and people thought she was at last contented, if not happy, with the rather dull and formal husband who had come back to her. They saw, too, or believed, that she and Castiglione were completely estranged and hardly spoke when they happened to meet

anywhere; but even such meetings were of very rare occurrence, because she and her husband were in such deep mourning.

The summer came, and they went northwards in a comfortable motor car. They stopped on their way to make short visits to more or less distant relations who were already at their country places; they spent a fortnight by the seaside, near Genoa, a day or two in Milan, a hot week in Venice near the end of July; and so they came by easy stages to Montalto, with its solemn towers, its deep woods and its waterfalls, its fertile valley, its rich farms and its thriving village; and there they stayed through the rest of the summer and into the early autumn.

Leone rode with Montalto every day, and by and by he was taught to hold a real gun in the right way, and then to shoot; and at last Montalto took him out one day and he fired his first shot at a pheasant and missed, but he killed a bird the second time, and was the happiest boy in the world for the rest of that day. Through all those months Montalto himself gained strength daily and recovered more and more of the comparative youthfulness which remains to a man not forty; and Maria changed little, if at all, though Leone thought the white patch near her left temple was growing larger.

Also, in those quiet days, the boy and the man became more and more closely attached to each other. Montalto took more real interest in teaching Leone to ride and shoot than he had ever shown in anything; and Leone was more entirely persuaded that Montalto was his ideal, though he

still declared that he himself would be a soldier and nothing else.

During this time Maria frequently saw Orlando Schmidt, the steward. She had not seen him in Rome after her husband had arrived, and when she noticed the latter's reserved tone in speaking of him, she had not mentioned him again and had soon forgotten his existence. There was no special reason why she should think of him at all, though she had found him very efficient and ready to serve her.

But now he appeared again, and as a personage of considerable importance, who came to her husband's study almost every day on matters connected with the estate. She met him the first time when she was alone in the great avenue that led from the park gate to the castle. He lived in a small house just outside the village at the foot of the hill, and he usually walked up by the avenue.

He bowed ceremoniously to the Countess from a considerable distance, and carried his hat in his hand as he came nearer. He blushed a little when she bent her head at last and said good-morning in passing; and as she did not stop to say more, he went on. He turned after he had gone on a few steps and looked after her, being quite sure that she would not do the same. Why should the Countess of Montalto condescend to look round at such a humble person as Orlando Schmidt? So he walked slowly and turned again and again to watch the graceful figure that was slowly gliding into the distance under the shade of the ancient elms. When he could no

longer see her distinctly he glanced at his watch and went on his way quickly.

Two days later Maria met him almost in the same place, and at almost the same hour in the morning; which was natural enough, for she had dropped into the dull punctuality in doing unimportant things at regular times which is the foundation of a woman's life in a country house where there are no visitors; and as it was Schmidt's business to be exact about his duties, there was really no reason why she should not pass him in the same place and nearly at the same moment, on every fine day.

This time Schmidt stood still at a short distance, as if he wished to say something, and when Maria stopped, he inquired if he could be of service to her in any way. She was a little surprised at the question.

He meant to ask, he said, whether she had any wishes with regard to the grounds or the garden. The Count, he explained, took no interest in those matters, but would be much pleased if her Excellency would give them some attention. He, Schmidt, had done his best to keep up the place since he had been in charge of it, but he was only too conscious that he knew nothing of landscape gardening and very little about flowers. Maria said quietly that she understood neither, though she knew what she liked.

Thereupon Schmidt observed that a quantity of handsome stone-work of the fifteenth century was lying piled up in the kitchen court, and he thought it must have been put there about a hundred and twenty or thirty years ago, when a Countess of Montalto had thought it

would be an improvement to destroy the beautiful mediæval close garden in the course of constructing a miniature Versailles which had never been finished. He, Schmidt, would take pleasure in showing the stone-work to her Excellency if she would take the trouble to look at it. He had also found an old plan of the former garden amongst the papers of his own great-grandfather, who had been steward of Montalto from 1760 to 1800. At a small cost the really beautiful mediæval well and cloistered walk could be reconstructed, and he ventured to suggest that they would be more in keeping with the whole place than a wretched little imitation of Lenôtre's vast work.

Maria thought so, too, and after saying that she would ask her husband about it, she nodded kindly to the thoughtful young man and continued her walk.

In the evening, when Montalto had told her the political news he had read before dinner, and had opened a third Havana cigarette to roll it over again in French paper, Maria told him what Schmidt had said. Montalto was naturally as punctual in all his little ways as his wife was rapidly becoming by acquired habit. The post came late in the afternoon, and he always spent half an hour in reading the newspapers before he dressed for dinner. Just as invariably, too, he told his wife what he had read, and he almost always reached the end of his budget of intelligence just as he began to make his third cigarette. Maria did not always listen to what he was telling her, but the third cigarette was a landmark in the long dull evening, and when it was reached she

knew that Montalto expected her to make a little conversation in return for his carefully repeated news. On this particular occasion she was glad to have something to say, and at once asked him about the old garden.

To her surprise Montalto did not give her any answer at once, and she waited for his reply, watching the motion of his well-made fingers, of which the first two were stained a deep yellowish brown from smoking cigarettes. They rolled the cigarette slowly, but very neatly.

'Yes,' Montalto said after a long time, when he had got a light and was leaning back in his chair. 'Yes,' he repeated, in a tone of profound meditation. 'Yes, by all means, if it amuses you, my dear.'

'Then you think Schmidt is right about the old things?' said Maria with a renewed interrogation in her tone.

Another pause, and several small puffs of smoke.

'Maria,' Montalto began, as if he had reached a conclusion, 'you are not what people call a highly accomplished woman, but you have a great deal of sense.'

The Countess wondered what was coming, and answered by a preliminary and deprecating smile. Montalto often told her that in his opinion she was the most beautiful creature in the world; after such nonsense it was a relief to be called a sensible woman. She might not be even that, but at all events the statement was not likely to lead to one of those outbreaks of his passion for her which she dreaded.

'Maria,' he said, as if he were beginning over again, 'I have great confidence in your judgment.'

'But I know nothing about gardening or mediæval wells,' she protested.

'Possibly not, though you know vastly more about both than I do. I was brought up under the influence of the Spanish taste of the eighteenth century, and I like it. Ippolito Saracinesca says it is atrocious, and of course he knows. But I like it, nevertheless.'

'At least, you have the courage of your opinion,' said Maria, still completely in the dark, but feeling that she must say something.

'That does not matter, for it is not the question,' returned her husband. 'We neither of us know anything about architecture, I am sure. But I shall be glad if you will go into this question with Schmidt, and then give me an opinion.'

'It will be worthless.'

'Not your opinion of the garden, my dear, but your opinion of Schmidt.'

'Oh!' Maria was very much surprised. 'But why? I told you in Rome that I thought him an excellent person and very intelligent!'

'Did it ever occur to you that he might be too intelligent?'

'No. But perhaps I don't understand just what you mean. Do you think he is educated above his station? Too good for his place?'

'Not at all. But sometimes, in money dealings and positions of trust, a man may be too clever. That is what I mean.'

'You mean that you don't quite trust him,' said

Maria, 'and you wish me to form a judgment of him.'

'I want your opinion,' answered Montalto, who was at odds with his over-sensitive conscience. 'I should be very unjust to Schmidt if I were to say that he may not be quite honest. It would be very wrong to assume such a thing of any one, would it not?'

'If you had no grounds for suspicion, yes. But even an instinctive distrust of a man of business is enough reason for not giving him the entire control of a large estate.'

'Do you really think so, my dear? You see, the men of his family have been our stewards for some little time.'

'He told me they had served you two hundred years.'

'Yes, yes — for some time, as you say, and I have always understood that they were honest people.'

He was so excessively scrupulous that Maria guessed he must have some serious ground for his slight suspicion of the man he was trusting. The question began to interest her, if only as a study of her husband's character.

'Really, Diego,' she said, 'if you wish me to form any reasonable judgment you must tell me something more than this. What has the man done to make you doubt him?'

Montalto looked at his wife thoughtfully before he answered.

'I will tell you, but you must not repeat the story to any one, please.'

'Certainly not.'

'He once got into some scrape, four or five years ago, and he took a small sum of money to help himself out of trouble.'

'Oh!' For the second time Maria was surprised. 'But that is called ——'

'He confessed it to me,' Montalto hastened to say before Maria could finish her sentence. 'He threw himself upon my mercy by a voluntary confession, promising to make up the sum as soon as he could. I thought the matter over for two days and then I forgave him.'

'That was like you,' Maria said gently.

Had he not forgiven her a far greater debt?

'It was only just,' Montalto answered. 'I meant never to think of the matter again unless he repeated the offence.'

'Has he done anything of the kind since then?'

'No.'

'But you think he might.'

'N — no. But he could if he wished to, and I don't think I should ever know it!'

'What do you mean?'

'My dear, he paid back the money very soon; so soon that I was surprised. Then I sent him to Spain on an errand, and while he was away I got a confidential accountant here and we examined his books very carefully.'

'Well?'

'It was impossible to find any trace of what he had done. Unless a man has actually taken money dishonestly, he does not confess and pay it back. But there

is something very strange about the matter if you cannot find some proof of his own confession in his own accounts.'

'Was it much?' asked Maria.

'Only five thousand francs. But in that year the books showed no change in the rent-roll of the estate — he might have made out that the rents had fallen, so as to pocket the difference, you understand. On the contrary, it was a good year, and the tenants paid punctually; and there were the banker's receipts for the corresponding deposits, exact to a fraction. Five thousand is not a large sum, but it is a very noticeable one in a matter of business.'

'I should think so!' assented Maria, thinking of the limited income on which she had lived for years, and in which a deficit of five thousand francs would have been a serious matter.

'It is very strange that a man whose business it is to detect frauds in accounts should not be able to find a trace of one that has been confessed by its author, is it not?'

'Very!'

'That is my reason for saying that Schmidt may be too intelligent. I hope I am not doing him an injustice in saying so. That is the reason why I want your opinion about him. I really could not ask him how he did it, after forgiving him, and it would have been still more unjust to reveal his secret by asking my banker to compare the receipts purporting to come from him with his own books. I had forgiven him freely; I could not accuse him to another man of having done what he had

voluntarily confessed. It would not have been honourable, for my banker would have known at once that I distrusted my steward and suspected him of forging banker's receipts.'

'Yes. I see.'

'Precisely. But the most honourable man in the world may confide matters to his wife which it would be base in him to lay before any one else.'

'Except a confessor,' Maria said; but she was not thinking of Schmidt.

'My confessor was not a man of any business capacity,' answered Montalto without a smile. 'Nor is my friend Ippolito Saracinesca either; and I would certainly not consult any one else except my wife.'

'Thank you.'

He had taken a long time to tell his story about the poor steward, hampered as he was at every step by a conscientious fear of injuring the man. What Maria saw was that he had been unboundedly generous to Schmidt, as he had been to her in a matter much nearer to life and death; and by a sort of unconscious analogical reasoning she felt, rather than concluded, that the steward must be as grateful as she was, and as resolved to be faithful at any cost. Moreover, he had made a favourable impression on her from the first; and though she was a little shocked at what she now learned about him, her ultimate verdict as to his present honesty was a foregone judgment.

After this long talk with Montalto she saw Schmidt often. He showed her the old plans, the position of the

former garden, and the fragments of the well and the cloistered walk, and after much consultation with her husband and several evenings spent in the study of Viollet-le-Duc, they determined that the old construction should be restored as far as possible, a conclusion which has no bearing upon this story beyond the fact that it was the means of bringing Maria and the steward together almost daily, and that the execution of the work and his careful economy in the whole affair raised him in the Countess's estimation; or rather, they confirmed that preconceived good opinion of him which she had formed in the beginning, and on which such grave matters afterwards turned.

Before they left Montalto her husband inquired as to the result of her observation of the man.

'I cannot help believing that he is now perfectly honest and devoted to your interests,' she said. 'That is the impression he makes on me, and I do not think it will change.'

'Then I shall take him to Rome,' Montalto answered without hesitation. 'Our property there is in a disgraceful state and is not yielding much more than the half of what it should. Schmidt is the only man I have under my hand who can set matters right, and he shall go to work at once.'

'I agree with you,' Maria said quietly. 'I thought so last spring when I first saw him.'

The life at Montalto went on a little longer after that, and the work on the garden made it a little less monotonous. Not that Maria disliked that side of it. Since

she was to live her married life again, it was a little easier to live it in that deep retirement, where she could so often be left to herself for half the day while Montalto and Leone were out shooting, or riding, or visiting some distant part of the estate. To be alone as much as possible was her chief aim in the arrangement of her day. There had been a time when she had been happy to have Leone always by her side; but now he talked to her so incessantly of her husband and of what they had done and were going to do together, that she often wished he would be silent or go away.

The time had come when the boy began to turn to the man for what he wanted, even more readily than to his mother; and there is nothing quite like a mother's loneliness of heart when she sees that she can no longer compete with the manly influence in amusing and interesting her only boy. How can pretty stories and sugar-plums stand against horse, and dog, and gun, and a day's sport? And what is motherly love to a healthy boy, compared with the qualities of a father who can give him such things and share in his enjoyment of them? Also, the smaller the boy the greater his delight in any grown-up sport, and Leone had begun to ride and shoot at an age when most Roman boys are scarcely out of the nursery. It is true that he looked two or three years older than his age, and had fought with boys bigger than himself, like Mario Campodonico, and had 'hammered' them, as he called it.

This was the situation between Montalto, his wife and the boy, when they all came back to Rome towards the

end of October; and Orlando Schmidt went before them to see that everything was ready and to take the place of the old steward, who had at last died, leaving the estate in a confusion worthy of his well-meaning stupidity. Schmidt was to set matters right, and find a proper man to manage the Roman lands under his general direction, while he himself administered the Montalto estate as heretofore. He had, in fact, been promoted to be the agent for all the property owned by the Count in Italy.

In October, too, six months after the Dowager Countess's death, Maria and her husband put on half mourning, according to the strict rule that prevails in Rome in those matters; and though they would not go to balls and big dinners yet, they were permitted to see something of their friends — and even of their acquaintances.

That was really the end of the quiet life they had led together for five months. Maria was to go back, take her place in society as a Roman lady, and be a great personage once more in that old-fashioned, ceremonious life which has survived in scarcely any other city in the world, and is fast disappearing in Rome itself.

So far had Maria dragged herself on the thorny path of her expiation without much help from without, and with little hope within.

CHAPTER XIV

Monsieur Jules de Maurienne gambled, and, like most rich men who do, he generally won more than he lost. He did not gamble for the sake of winning money, however, for he was a gentleman and avarice was not among his faults, though he was not extravagant in his way of living, and knew very nearly to a penny what he spent from month to month. What he enjoyed was the excitement of fearing that he was going to lose, as he occasionally did, though with no serious damage to his fortune. Some people do daring things when there is a good reason for doing them, and they are like cats at bay; others are incapable of physical fear and never believe in danger, and they are likely healthy puppies; but one meets men now and then who fully realise every risk, and take a real pleasure in trying how far they can go without breaking their necks. None of the lower animals will do this; it is a characteristic of the born gambler.

De Maurienne did not play much in drawing-rooms or at the clubs. The stakes were rarely high enough to give him an emotion, and the sensation of winning much from friends who could not always afford to lose made him uncomfortable. He therefore frequented one of those quiet little establishments in the neighbourhood

of the Piazza di Spagna where baccara, roulette, and rouge et noir go on from three in the afternoon till three in the morning, or later. He was far too refined in his taste for pleasure to waste a whole evening at such a place, and he frequented it at odd moments late in the afternoon. A man is rarely missed at that hour, and if he occasionally finds an acquaintance in a gambling den, the encounter is not mentioned afterwards, any more than those who meet there would think of calling each other by their names. For the society in the haunts of vice is extremely mixed, to say the least of it, though the owners of the establishments take infinite trouble to make it select.

Teresa Crescenzi had not succeeded in marrying de Maurienne during the summer, though they had gone together all the way from Rome to Paris in his big motor car, and nobody happened to remember who had made up the party. On some points the Italians and the French never seem to understand each other. Monsieur de Maurienne appeared to think it quite unnecessary to marry Donna Teresa Crescenzi, whereas she was equally convinced that marriage was indispensable. With the arguments and stratagems used on each side this story is not concerned; it is a cowardly thing to spy upon a lady's secret doings, and the novelist should sometimes imitate Falstaff in judging discretion to be the better part of valour. He may, however, remind his forgetful readers that when Teresa met Maria Montalto in a quiet street and said that she had been to confession, she was wilfully misstating a fact.

It came to pass, towards Christmas, that she noticed how often her friend disappeared late in the afternoon. It is easier and more amusing to make a long story short than to make a short story long. Here, therefore, are the facts in the case. She expected to meet de Maurienne somewhere at tea, but he did not come; the next time she saw him she asked where he had been, and he named the house of another friend. Tactful inquiry soon ascertained that he had not been there either. The same thing happened three times within ten days, and Teresa made up her mind that there was another woman in the case. Being anxious not to lose time, which, at her age, still had some value, and having no scruples of any sort, she employed a private detective, who ran the truant de Maurienne to earth on the third day at the door of a gambling den in Via Belsiana. It is odd that all detectives should know just where such wicked places are, whereas the police can hardly ever find them. Why do the police not employ the detectives, as other people do? But these things are a mystery.

Teresa was so much relieved that she gave her informant a handsome present; for, like many people who have nothing, she often gave lavishly; and having noted the address of the gambling establishment and the hour at which de Maurienne had twice been seen entering it, she completed the detective's work by watching the door herself. With a veil and a quiet-looking frock she could walk in the almost deserted street without attracting attention, and her bearing was not calculated to invite enterprise on the part of any stray dandy who might

pass that way. Indeed, only one man made the mistake of speaking to her.

She only wanted to be sure that de Maurienne really went to that house on the days when he could not be found anywhere else; when she was certain of this her jealousy sank peacefully to rest. She knew that he would never ruin himself. As for the likelihood of being recognised by him, she was indifferent to that. She would have told him that she had been to confession, and would have asked him to find her a cab.

But in the course of several half-hours spent in this way in Via Belsiana, about dusk, she saw a surprising number of men enter the modest door, and now and then she recognised an acquaintance. She also saw a few come out, who must have gone there early in the afternoon. It was one of these who made the mistake of speaking to her as he met her, half a dozen steps from the threshold. She held her head in the air and quickened her pace, and he did not try to follow her; but she had seen his face clearly, and remembered it afterwards, and thought he must have been a foreigner, for he was fair, with a fresh complexion, and wore grey clothes that had not an Italian look.

She made her annual round of visits before Christmas, as Romans generally do, and, like a sensible woman, she did not merely leave cards everywhere without so much as asking whether people were in; on the contrary, she was conscientious, and tried to find them at home.

It was quite natural that she should call on the Countess of Montalto, but when she did, she was told that Maria

was out. This might happen to anybody, of course, so she wrote a line on her card to say that she would come again very soon, and drove away. Two days later she asked for Maria again. Her Excellency was out. This also might happen, with no intention. Three days after that she stopped a third time at the entrance of the palace. The tall porter lifted his black cocked hat with imperturbable serenity and respect. Her Excellency was not at home.

Then Teresa began to suspect something, and took a card with the intention of writing a few words to ask when Maria would see her; and while she was hesitating about the phrase, which the porter would certainly read before sending it upstairs, she sat in her little hired phaeton and unconsciously looked in under the great archway, past the porter, who was waiting at her elbow. Just at that moment she saw a man coming towards her from within, a fair man with a fresh complexion, dressed in grey. He glanced at her and lifted his hat a little, and the porter moved to let him pass, because the carriage was very near the pillars that stood on each side of the entrance. Teresa was not above asking questions of a servant when she was curious.

'Who was that?' she inquired, looking down and beginning to write on her card while she spoke. 'I know his face, but I cannot remember his name.'

'He is the steward of Montalto, Excellency, Signor Schmidt.'

'Of course!' exclaimed Teresa as if she now remembered perfectly.

She finished writing, gave the porter the card, and drove away, meditating on the fact that the steward of Montalto frequented a gambling den in Via Belsiana and spoke to ladies in the street. It also annoyed her to think that Monsieur de Maurienne had doubtless often played at the same table with such people, and had possibly won money from Signor Schmidt. Teresa was more sensitive on some points than on others.

Maria did not answer her written message. On the second day Teresa received a note in a large, stiff handwriting, unfamiliar to her.

Montalto had written himself, in very cold and formal terms, to request her not to put herself to the inconvenience of asking for the Countess again.

Nothing could have been plainer, and Teresa flushed angrily.

'That is what one gets for defending one's friends!' she cried, in a rage.

But she remembered quite well that in her anxiety to defend Maria she had said a number of extremely disagreeable things about Montalto's mother, which were also quite untrue. Some careful relation had doubtless repeated her observations to him, and now he refused to let her enter his house. She wondered rather flippantly what would happen if everything she had said in her life were repeated to the wrong people, and the idea was so amusing that she laughed at it. But she bore Montalto a lasting grudge from that day, and it pleased her to reflect that his steward spent spare hours in a gambling den and would probably rob him in the end. She would

take great care to keep the secret, lest some one should warn him in time, but she would also do her best to meet Maria in some friend's house, and would tell her what she thought of her behaviour. She felt the humiliation of having had her name sent down to the porter's lodge as that of a person for whom the Countess was never at home. Such a thing had never happened to her before.

She was Maria's enemy now, as she had once been her defender, when it had suited her to take the side of frailty, which may bend without being quite broken, against that columnar social virtue which may possibly break but never bends at all. Teresa's enmity was not likely to be very dangerous, however, for she was, on the whole, a good-natured gossip, and might at any time be in need of a good word for herself in the dangerous game she was playing.

She reflected with rather unnecessary bitterness on her position as a defenceless widow, and felt quite sure that if she were Madame de Maurienne, Montalto would not have the courage to insult her husband by refusing to receive her.

CHAPTER XV

Castiglione had a sort of rule for avoiding Maria which worked very well for a long time. There is a great sameness in the lives of Roman ladies even now, and in a society which is numerically small it is rarely hard to guess where the more important members of it are. So long as Maria had lived in Via San Martino, not by any means cut off from the world, but quite independent of it, she had been in the habit of coming and going as she pleased. She could slip out to the little oratory in Via Somma Campagna at seven o'clock in the morning, she could put on her hat unknown to her maid and go over to the station to post a letter, she could call a cab and drive to Saint Peter's, or she could take Leone with her at a moment's notice, on a fine day, for a walk in the outlying quarters of the city, towards Santa Maria Maggiore. All these things look very simple, unimportant, and easy, and it might be supposed that she could have enjoyed the same small liberty after she had moved back to the Palazzo Montalto.

But she could not. Whenever she went out, there was a footman on duty in the hall, where the wide swinging door to the landing of the grand staircase was never fastened except at night. If she was allowed to go downstairs alone, the footman touched a bell that rang in the

porter's lodge, and the porter was waiting for her under the arched entrance, respectful but imposing, and by no means allowing her to take a cab for herself at the stand, fifty paces from the door. The cab must be called for her, and two of those on the stand were privileged by turns, because the cabmen paid the porter a percentage of what he allowed them to earn. Then, too, the address to which she wished to be taken had to be given to him, and he transmitted it to the cabman in a stern manner, as if he thought the man certainly meant to take her somewhere else and must be dealt with severely.

As for going out in her own carriage, that was quite an affair of state, too, though old Telemaco still sat on the box. She could not go to the telephone whenever she pleased and order him to come when she wanted him. There was red tape in such matters. Maria had to tell a footman, who had to tell another, who went downstairs when he was ready and who was in no hurry to find the coachman; and difficulties arose about horses which had never been heard of when she had hired a pair by the month.

Moreover, Leone now had a tutor at home, and was taken to the clerical Istituto Massimo every morning, because Montalto objected to the public schools, and Maria was not able to argue the question.

'Either you believe in our religion, or you do not, my dear,' the Count had said.

'I hope I do,' Maria had answered meekly.

'In that case I cannot see how you can even think of sending Leone to a school where no religion is taught.'

She could not answer this, though she had a suspicion that the boy might be 'taught religion' in some other and better way than at the day-school. Yet it was better to have him go to the Istituto Massimo and come home for luncheon, than to lose him altogether for three-quarters of the year, as she must if he were sent to the Jesuit school of Mondragone in the country; and that seemed to be the alternative in Montalto's mind. He himself had been several years at the latter place, but Leone had become necessary to him and he wanted the boy at home. Maria submitted a little more readily to his decision when she thought of Castiglione, who had been through a public school and the military academy, and who, according to her ideas, had no religion at all.

Leone's schooling, the Count's methodical habits, and the tiresome formalities and traditions of existence in the great house combined to make Maria's days almost as monotonously regular in Rome as they had been in Montalto; and as they closely resembled those of other Roman ladies of the same age who had children to educate, it was not hard for Castiglione to keep out of her way.

So far as society went it was made still easier, because even after Christmas, when their mourning was slightly relaxed, Montalto was evidently inclined to confine his acquaintance to the old-fashioned and clerical houses, so far as any still existed, rather than to extend it into the modern circles where Castiglione was more often seen. Montalto made an exception for Giuliana Parenzo and her husband.

Similar conditions being granted for any particular case, two people can live a long time without meeting face to face, even in Rome; and in a city like London they may not meet in a dozen years if they wish to avoid each other.

Castiglione faced his life quietly and courageously, but there were moments in which his intention weakened. At times it seemed to him impossible that such a situation should last till his regiment left Rome. Maria was a saint, he admitted, and he had no doubt at all but that he was a man of honour and meant to respect his promise, however quixotic it looked. But he did not 'rise higher,' as Maria used to write him that he must, and still prayed that he might. On the contrary, though he kept his word, he sometimes wished that he had not given it; the roughly masculine side of his nature rebelled against the higher life, till he asked himself why, after all, he was living like a man under vows and avoiding the woman he loved, for the sake of a dream that was quite past and could never visit him again.

But these moods never lasted long. It was true that he had not Maria's faith in things unseen to help him, nor her beatific vision of an eternal reward for earthly virtues; but, on the other hand, he had a strong perception of what was right and wrong, in the sense that conceives actions as morally noble or ignoble, and brave or cowardly, and he guessed what Maria was undergoing. He had been the cause of her suffering, and it would be dastardly to let her outdo him in courage, knowing that she loved him still. In refusing to see him she was making the greatest sacrifice she could, next to the supreme

one she had made when she had let her husband take her back. Castiglione knew that. People who love in earnest do not stop to ask if they are flattering themselves when they believe that they are loved in return.

The soldier was not at all analytical, though he had so long led an inward existence which no one suspected. He knew when his thoughts were ignoble, and he despised them then and was disgusted with himself; but during most of the time he merely looked upon the exceptional life he was leading for Maria's sake as a duty, and therefore as something which must be done, whether he liked it or not. He was rather a rough specimen of manhood, but his nature was on large lines. Under grosser influences in early youth, he might have turned out what women call a brute, and perhaps it was only his love for Maria that had saved him from that. All men saints have not been born like Bernard of Clairvaux, ethereal, spiritual, eloquent, and already beings of another world. There have been very human Augustines, too, and sorely tempted Anthonys without end, and there have been denying Peters and doubting Thomases ever since the beginning; and because some of them were men of like passions with ourselves, most of us feel nearer to them than to the great ascetics, and we understand them better.

In his thoughts Castiglione called Maria a saint, and compared her to a Catherine of Siena rather than to a Magdalen; but she, too, had her moments of passionate regret, if not of weakness; she, too, was human still, and though she bore her pain like a martyr, she loved like a loving woman.

Here ends such explanation and repetition as was needed to make clear what soon happened to her, to her husband, and to Castiglione. After many months of quiet, when it seemed to Maria that nothing could ever happen again in her life beyond the daily round of dull misery, fate took up the action again with sudden and violent hands.

The two met by accident for a few moments, quite alone. It was at a hotel, of all places in the world; at a quiet and rather old-fashioned hotel which is patronised by the great of the earth when they come to Rome unofficially, for their own pleasure. A short time ago it was such a primitive place that the lift was small and was worked from below, like most of those in Roman private houses.

Now it happened that a certain young couple went to this hotel who were nearly related to the Count of Montalto on the Spanish side of his family, and who were of such exalted station that two smart officers were told off to be at their disposal and to show them the sights of Rome. One of these officers was Castiglione.

In the natural course of social events the Countess of Montalto had written her name in the book which people of such overwhelming importance keep at the porter's lodge in hotels where they stop, because cards cannot be left for them as for ordinary human beings, on account of their inconvenient greatness. On the following day the Countess was informed that she would be received at five o'clock, and at three minutes to five her carriage stopped at the door. The footman informed the porter

that her Excellency the Countess of Montalto came to see their Highnesses, and at the same instant Castiglione, who was on duty, and in uniform, presented himself to conduct the Countess upstairs.

It was rather a trying moment, for he had not been told who was coming, and he was the last person whom Maria expected to see there. As the footman opened the carriage door Castiglione put forward his arm to help her out, and she laid her hand upon it as lightly and indifferently as she could, but a thrill ran through her to her very feet, and she felt how he stiffened his arm lest it should shake. After the first glance of recognition they avoided each other's eyes.

The porter stalked solemnly before them to the lift, and a moment later they were alone together in a space so small that they could hardly keep from touching, while the cage began to ascend with that extreme slowness which characterises the old-fashioned Roman contrivances. Maria sat on the narrow little seat, feeling that she dared not look up; Castiglione stood upright, squeezing his square shoulders as far back into the corner as he could, and holding his right hand on the handle of the sliding door. He breathed audibly, and the lift crawled upwards.

It was almost unbearable for them both. To speak indifferently was utterly impossible, and silence meant too much. Just as they were reaching the first floor, Maria rose quickly, expecting to be let out; but the cage did not stop.

They were face to face now, and very near together,

so that Castiglione distinctly felt her sharply drawn breath as she looked up at him.

'It is the next floor,' he said unsteadily, for he could not take his eyes from her now.

The meeting had been too sudden, too close; Maria could not bear it, but Castiglione would have let his right hand be cut off at the wrist, as it held the door, rather than have moved it towards her. With the other he held his sabre close to his left side, and his blue eyes gazed hungrily into hers. A moment more and the lift would stop; there was only that moment left, for, without looking away from him, she was aware of the landing just overhead. Then she spoke.

'I love you more than ever!'

The words came to him in a fierce whisper. She had never spoken in that way, even in days of the short sweet dream that was all he had left. His answer was in his eyes, and in the sudden pallor that overspread his face, the ghastly white pallor of fair men who are deeply moved.

Then the lift stopped, the door slid sideways in its grooves, and he was leading the way through a wide corridor under the electric light. Maria was not pale just then; there was a little dark red flush in each cheek, for shame at what she had done.

Her visit was soon over, she hardly knew how, and when she came out Castiglione was not to be seen. A servant offered to call for the lift, but she refused it and almost ran down the stairs in her haste to get out of the hotel. A quarter of an hour later she was alone in her

boudoir, sitting before the small wood fire with her elbows on her knees and her chin supported on her clasped hands.

She was terrified when she thought of what she had done, and an unreasoning fear of the future took possession of her. She felt that she had broken her solemn promise and betrayed her husband's unbounded faith in her; for she knew how she had spoken the half-dozen words, and that if Castiglione had taken her into his arms then, her lips would have met his instantly, willingly, passionately. It had not been possible there; but if they had been in another place, could she have blamed him as she blamed herself? And by and by, when it was late, perhaps she would hear the familiar knock at her unlocked door, and the lips that had spoken those fierce little whispered words to the man she loved would have to say 'Come in' to the man whom she was pledged to honour. That was the sum and result, after so many months of pain and prayer and self-abasement, by which she had hoped to rise heavenwards. If only the man had spoken first, she could have grasped at the straw of self-excuse, she could have deluded herself with the thought that she had been tempted. But he had been silent, he had stood quite still, only looking at her, brave against himself and constant to his plighted promise. It was she who had tempted him; that was what she had come to!

There was only one way now, she would tear the thought of him from her heart for ever, and trample out his memory as men stamp upon the embers of the camp

fire when the wind rises, lest the dry grass be kindled, and they themselves be burnt to death in the storm of flame. It was well that Montalto had taken her back and that the dream had ended in that sharp agony; if there had been no such waking it would have turned into a reality she shuddered to think of.

She rose and went to her writing-table and opened a deep drawer. It was there that she kept the small locked desk she had used in Via San Martino, the one in which she had put away Castiglione's letters, meaning to burn them. With them there was also that letter of her husband's in which he had first spoken of reconciliation, and she had never opened the writing-case since she had placed it there.

It had been spring when she had left the little apartment, and there had been no fire in any of the rooms. The fireplaces were closed with painted boards, in the Italian way, and she had not wished to excite her servants' curiosity by taking out the board and burning a quantity of papers on the clean hearth. Burnt paper leaves its unmistakable black ash behind it, and the servants might guess that she had destroyed old love-letters before going back to her husband. Besides, she had thought them innocent then. She had thought that some day she might find comfort in reading them over and recalling the sweetest illusion of her life, the happy and innocent dream of a love grown pure and true in years of waiting and trial. The well-loved writing was dearer to her than she would confess even to herself.

But those letters must be burnt now. She was alone,

for Montalto was hardly ever at home at that hour, and Leone was busy at his late afternoon lesson with his tutor, after having been out till nearly sunset. The small fire was burning well, too, and it would be a matter of only two or three minutes to destroy everything; and it must be done at once, while she felt the courage to do it.

She lifted the case out of the drawer and set it on the table before her, turning up the shaded light she used for writing. It was a little old desk that had belonged to her grandmother, made of ebony and inlaid with metal and mother-of-pearl in the happily forgotten taste of the Second Empire. It was of the old sloping shape, made so that when it was opened the upper part turned down in front, continuing the inclined plane to the level of the table, to give enough space for writing; it was one of those primitive attempts at a convenient travelling writing-case which had seemed marvels of ingenuity in those days, and look so hopelessly clumsy to our modern eyes. But Maria's grandmother had used it for many years, and it had a lock. Everything could be locked in those days, though most of the keys were absurdly simple. Maria looked at it, and remembered that the folding board was covered on the inside with very faded and threadbare purple velvet on which there were three or four inkstains; and when the outer cover was down the upper half of the folding board made a second lid which could be turned down on the first, and there was a little silk tag fastened to it, by which it could be moved. Under this second lid was the body of the desk, a space large enough to contain a good many papers.

Maria sat at the table with the case before her, and her hands upon it. She meant to burn all the letters, except Montalto's, without reading them. That would be the only way, and it would not take more than two or three minutes; yet she hesitated, though she had already taken the little key from the chain on which she had always carried it.

Might she not at least think for the last time of those dear words? They had been quite innocent. If worse had come to worst she would have shown them even to her husband. They were not eloquent, for Castiglione had small gift for writing. They were not the rough and uncouth love-letters that such a man might have written; for the very essence of the lost dream had been that it was to ignore the earthly love and look forward to the spiritual. He had tried to follow whither she meant to lead, and what he had written was the sincere effort, the pathetically imperfect effort, to see something heavenly through eyes not used to call up the unreal in visions.

She remembered well the awkward wording of his sentences, and the way he had groped at the meaning of what seemed so clear to her. He could understand whatever had to do with honour, with courage, and even with sacrifice, if it were for her sake. But heavenly things were quite beyond him, and even the earthly paradise she had tried to show him seemed very complicated. Yet he would try to make himself comprehend it because all her thoughts were beautiful, and because she had taught him where true honour lay, in honouring her honour, and in kneeling at the shrine of her purity, he, a poor material man.

Her purity! She remembered how the word had looked in his bold handwriting; and though she was alone, the flush of shame rose and burned her cheek, so that she laid the back of her cold hand to the spot to cool it; for her own words were whispered again in her ears.

That echo decided her. There was no time to be lost. It had all been a lie from the day when he had come to her pretty booth at the Kermess. Such dreams were inventions of the devil, and nothing but rank poison. She loved Castiglione more than ever, as woman loves man, fiercely, desperately, very sinfully, very shamefully. That was what her whisper had told him plainly enough. Her cold hands pressed her burning cheeks again, but there was no hesitation left. She was alone, the fire was burning, and surely no one would disturb her during the next five minutes.

She thrust the small key into the lock and turned it. It stuck a little and she pushed it in and out, and turned it to the right and left with almost feverish haste, till she heard the click of the tiny bolt, and she lifted the folding board towards her on the table. Her fingers sought the little faded silk tag by which the second lid was to be lifted, but it must have been jammed in when she had last shut the case. She took the first thing that lay under her hand, a sharp steel letter-opener in the shape of a sword, and she forced the point a little way in between the lid and the edge of the ebony case, pressing hard on the little gold hilt. The lid flew up suddenly on its hinges and fell forwards towards her.

Then her heart failed her. The desk was empty.

She uttered a sort of faltering little cry, and she fell back in her chair with starting eyes and parted lips, her hands still grasping the open lid. In the wild confusion of her horror and the frantic effort of her memory to recall something that had never been, she was mad for a moment. Had she burnt everything and forgotten? Or had she put the papers in some safer place, and lost all recollection of what she had done?

That was impossible. She never forgot what she did, and she had thought too often of the letters not to be sure that she had last seen them there. Some one had forced the desk and taken them. The key had not turned easily, as it had always turned, because somebody had tampered with the lock. The little silk tag of the inner lid had been jammed inside by a hand unfamiliar with it. The details flashed upon her quickly, and in half a minute she understood that she had forgotten nothing. She had left the letters in the desk, and they were no longer there. Some one had stolen them all, and her husband's letter with them.

She grew slowly cold with fear as she closed the empty desk and put it into the drawer again; and once more that hideous thought rose up and tormented her. Montalto had come back to be revenged upon her for his wrongs, slowly and surely; and that was not all, for he had come secretly to her room when she was out of the house and had stolen her letters, for a weapon against her if he needed one.

Who else in the house would have dared to take them?

CHAPTER XVI

Such a thought could have no real hold upon Maria, and she put it away angrily, as unworthy and ungenerous, even in an extremity which might have excused her for suspecting some innocent person. It was much more likely, she soon told herself, that she had been robbed by some servant in the house, who would sooner or later attempt to blackmail her by threatening to show the letters to her husband. As for knowing even approximately when the theft had taken place, that was impossible. She had opened the writing-case for the last time in May, and nearly eight months had now elapsed. It was one of the objects she had formerly always locked up in a closet in Via San Martino when she left Rome for the summer. This year she had put it into the deep drawer of her new writing-table, which had an English patent lock, and she had taken the key with her to the country; but she knew that patent locks always had two keys when they were new, and it occurred to her now that she had never seen the second. Since she had been in Rome again she had not even locked the drawer, and had felt safe in carrying only the key of the desk itself. It was impossible to say when it had been opened, and she realised at once how useless it was to waste time and thought in trying to detect the thief.

He would reveal himself when he wanted the money. She felt sure that money only had been his object in stealing the letters, for she could not imagine that any one should have done it for mere hatred of her.

The question was whether the thief would demand his price from her or from Montalto. Most probably he would write first to her, for he would know that she had some independent fortune. She would give anything he asked, even if he asked for all she had.

But, on the other hand, he might go directly to her husband. The thought appalled her; the catastrophe might happen at any moment; it had perhaps happened already, that very day, since she had seen Montalto, and she would see the change in his face when they met at dinner; afterwards, when they were alone, he would bring his accusation against her, and it would be a more bitter one than the first had been, long ago. Her shame would be greater, too, before the world when he left her the second time and for ever, and the final ruin of his life would be upon her soul.

She wished she had told him everything when she had spoken of her meeting with Castiglione; but she had judged it wiser not to say more, for she had felt innocent of all evil then, and the knowledge that many letters had been exchanged would have sorely disturbed her husband's peace. He would have answered her that she should have written him all the truth before he came home. If she had only done that, he might never have returned to claim her. Yet this thought was evil, too, now that she had said those words to Castiglione in the

lift, and she must kill the memory of her lover in her heart if she had the least respect left for herself, or for her husband's honour, or for God's right.

Even now it would be better to throw herself upon Montalto's mercy and confess the truth before the thief wrote to him. She would rather tell it all, against herself, than let him learn it suddenly, brutally, from the vile letter in which the blackmailer would make his demand. It would be easier for Montalto too. At least he would be warned; at least, if he chose to cast her off again, she would have given him the weapon, the right, and the opportunity. Yes, it would be better so.

The brave thought took possession of her quickly. She believed she saw the right course before her, in the clear light of a good inspiration. Perhaps Montalto had come home already, though it was only six o'clock and he rarely came in before seven. She now recollected that Giuliana Parenzo and Monsignor Saracinesca were coming to dinner. When her husband told her that he had asked Don Ippolito to dine, she generally telephoned to Giuliana to come if she could. The two men often engaged in endless discussions about the relations of Church and State, during the evening; the layman believed in the dream of restoring the temporal power of the Pope, the churchman did not, and had a patriotic affection for his country and a belief in its future, which made Montalto tremble for his salvation. At first Maria had derived some amusement from this anomalous situation, but when she had occasionally ventured to put in a word for the new order of things, Montalto had

been visibly displeased. After that she had resorted to the device of asking Giuliana, with whom she could talk quietly at one end of the drawing-room while her husband and his friend carried on their unending argument at the other. Incidentally, she often wondered how such a broad-minded man as Don Ippolito could be so sincerely attached to such a prejudiced one as Montalto.

To-night she would have to wait till the Canon and the Marchesa were gone before she could speak to her husband. It would be very unwise to tell him her story before dinner, though she felt an intense desire to unburden herself of it at once. She wondered how she should get through the evening, from eight o'clock till half-past ten or eleven, without betraying her distress; but to her own surprise she found herself growing calmer and cooler than she could have thought it possible for her to be. She was in something more than trouble; she was in danger from an unknown and dastardly hand, and she was naturally brave enough to be calmer at such a moment than under the strain of any purely mental suffering.

She was conscious of impatience more than of fear or want of strength, for she was going to do the only thing that was brave and right and truthful, and after that such consequences might come as must.

She put the empty desk away in the drawer, and after a moment's hesitation she unlocked the door of the passage that led to the chapel, opening it with one hand as she moved the key to turn up the electric light; she

entered, shut the door after her, and went forwards, absorbed in her thoughts.

Before she was half-way down the long straight part of the passage, after the corner, the lights went out. She stood still in momentary surprise and then turned back. The electric light had been put in by a German company, and the keys were little flat levers that were kept in place by a spring. Maria thought she had perhaps not pushed the one at the boudoir door quite far enough to set it, and that it had sprung back of itself and cut off the current. She retraced her steps, following the smooth varnished wall with her hand till she reached the familiar corner, and then her own door. She pushed the lever both ways but no light came, so she concluded that an accident had happened to the wires just when she was half-way through the passage.

There were no candles in the room, but she lit a wax taper she used for sealing notes. It was a long and thick one, rolled on itself and fitted into an old silver stand with a handle like a candlestick, and it gave a very fair light. She threw the match into the fire, entered the passage again, and made her way towards the chapel. She went in and set the taper-stand on the marble floor beside her as she knelt down in the place which was always hers.

Three small silver lamps, fed with pure olive oil and hanging from the arch over the altar, shed a feeble light which was considerably strengthened by that from the taper. The ugly barocco angels and stucco work cast queer shadows above the altar and the walls, but Maria

did not even glance at them and bent her head down over her clasped hands. The chapel had often been her refuge and her place of peace, since she had first come there long before dawn in the night that followed her husband's return.

As she knelt there now in the silence and gloom she was thinking, rather than trying to say any prayer; she was going over in her mind the things she must say to be quite truthful. She was recalling the words she had once said to Castiglione, the two innocent kisses she had received from him, the promises both had given and both had kept until to-day; and in the presence of the mortal danger that was hanging over her now, she felt that the whispered words of love she had spoken that afternoon were perhaps but a small matter compared with it; a sin that concerned her own soul only, to be confessed, repented of, and forgiven in time, whereas the main great matters were her husband's honour and the happiness she had tried so hard to give him in all ways.

If only she could make him see the truth as she had seen it, he would understand and still forgive; and her fortune could buy back the evidence of what had been no real betrayal of his honour. If only she could tell her true story as she knew it, that would be the result.

She started as she knelt, and looked round in the dimness, with the sudden conviction that she was not alone. Her hearing and sight were very keen, but she was not aware of having heard any sound or seen any moving shadow in the chapel. The certainty had come upon her all at once, instinctively, she knew not how.

There was nothing to be seen, but she listened intently with bent head. A moment later she looked up again, for she had heard something. Some one was breathing not far from her, and it was that soft and regular sound that had warned her before she was aware that she heard it.

Her first impulse was to rise and search the chapel with her taper, but it occurred to her that Montalto might have come there to say his prayers, and might be kneeling somewhere out of sight, behind one of the pillars that supported the arch. He had perhaps heard her enter, and had not wished to disturb her by betraying his presence. In his slow way he was very thoughtful for her. She would go away now, and not let him know that she had heard him breathing.

But perhaps, again, if he were really present, there could be no better time or place for telling him her story and appealing to his kindness. Her impatience to do that turned the scale.

'Diego, are you here?' she asked softly.

There was no answer, but the breathing ceased for a moment and then the unseen person drew a longer breath. Maria felt a little thrill that was not fear; it was more like resentment. She took the taper from the floor and rose to her feet.

'Who is here?' she asked in a louder tone.

Still there was no answer. Perhaps, after all, it was only a cat that had slipped in when the chapel was being swept, and had gone to sleep. Maria moved towards the altar, shading the light from her eyes with her hand and peering over it into the gloom. She spoke as she walked.

'I hear you breathing. Show yourself, whoever you are! Come forward at once!'

She spoke authoritatively and coolly, though at that very moment something told her that the intruder might be a thief who had come to steal the famous relic of the Cross that was preserved under the altar. She looked first to the right and then to the left, and there, flattened against the wall in the shadow of the pilaster, she saw the figure of a man. Without hesitating a moment she went straight towards him. When he understood that he was caught he came forward at last, and the light of the taper showed her the face of Orlando Schmidt, the steward.

Maria stopped two paces from him.

'What are you doing here at this hour?' she asked sternly.

She had never before seen him pale; he was white round the lips now.

'I beg your Excellency's pardon,' he said with a glibness that did not at all agree with his looks, 'I came to see about some work that is to be done, and when you entered I hid myself in order not to disturb your Excellency's devotions.'

The Countess held the small light higher and scrutinised his face thoughtfully.

'You are not telling the truth,' she said with great calmness. 'What were you doing here?'

'What I have told you, Signora Contessa,' he answered stubbornly.

'There is no work to be done here,' returned Maria,

her tone growing hard and clear. 'The Count and I have talked of the chapel recently. If you do not at once tell me what brings you here, with no light at this hour, I shall go to the door and call.'

The chapel opened into the ante-chamber, of which the door was generally open to the outer hall, where a footman was always stationed.

'Your Excellency is quite welcome,' said Schmidt, and his coolness almost convinced Maria that he had told the truth.

Yet his face was very white and his eyes showed his inward fear.

'Take care,' Maria said. 'The Count has told me how he forgave you once. I do not wish to ruin you, but unless you tell the truth I shall call some one. You have either taken the relic from under the altar or you came here to take it.'

'You are mistaken, Signora Contessa,' the man answered obstinately; 'the relic is in its place. You may see for yourself.'

'Then give me the keys, for you have them in your pocket.'

'I have not, Excellency.'

'I do not believe you.'

Maria held the light so that she could see him while she moved quickly towards the large door.

'I am going to call the servants,' she said, 'and they shall search your pockets.'

Schmidt attempted to smile.

'Your Excellency cannot be in earnest,' he managed to

say, but his teeth were chattering and he was perfectly livid.

The Countess laid her hand on the lock. It could be opened from within by a handle, but required a latch-key to open it from the other side. She watched Schmidt steadily and began to turn the knob. He looked round in a scared way, as if hoping to see some means of escape, and her fingers slowly turned the handle of the door. At the last second he broke down.

'For God's sake, Excellency!' he cried, in utmost fear. 'I have taken nothing! I swear it on the altar, on the Sacrament ——'

'Do not blaspheme,' said the Countess quietly, and she let the latch spring softly back into its place. 'If you had not something about you which you have stolen, you would not be so frightened at the idea of being searched.'

'It is the disgrace before the servants ——'

'That is absurd. If nothing is found on you, the blame will fall on me. You must make up your mind instantly whether you will throw yourself on my mercy and show me what you have taken, or whether the men shall search you.'

Her hand moved to the lock again, and Schmidt read in her face that her patience was exhausted. A southern Italian would have become dramatic at this point, and would probably have fallen on his knees, tearing his hair and shedding real tears. But Schmidt was from the north, and practically an Austrian. He was a thief, he saw that he was caught, and he made the best of the situation at once.

'Then I appeal to your Excellency's generosity,' he said quietly. 'I have not touched the relic, and what I took some time ago I had come to restore when you found me here.'

He produced from his pocket a square package, done up in a clean sheet of white paper, without string. He handed it to her.

'You will find here seven letters from the Conte del Castiglione,' he said, 'and one from his Excellency. I took them from your writing-case three weeks ago, and I was going to put them back this evening while you were at dinner. I heard you coming and I could not go out by the ante-chamber without being seen. So I cut the wire of the light and hid myself.'

Maria's hand had closed upon the precious packet while he spoke.

'You?' she cried at last. She was almost speechless with amazement. 'You took them?'

'Yes, Signora Contessa, and I give them back and implore your pardon.'

'Why did you take them if it was not to extract money from me?' Maria asked, recovering her presence of mind quickly.

In the storm of her distress she felt as if a wave had lifted her up and had set her high on the shore, and at the first moment she was more amazed at the man's audacity than angry at what he had done.

'Signora Contessa,' he said, 'the story the Count told you is true; since he forgave me, there is nothing I will not do for him, his interest, and his honour. I did your

Excellency the great injustice of suspecting that you still corresponded with the Signor Conte del Castiglione. I have read the letters and I have observed the dates. I was wrong. If you think it wise to disturb my master's peace by telling him what I have done, I must submit and bear his displeasure. He will turn me out for having dared to play detective and spy upon the Signora Contessa in his own house, for his confidence in you is absolute. Will your Excellency verify the contents of the package? I will hold the taper, if you will allow me.'

Maria felt as if she were in a dream, half good, half evil. She opened the packet while Schmidt held the light, and she quickly made sure that none of the letters were missing and that each was complete; that was soon done, for Castiglione had rarely filled more than one sheet in writing to her.

She laid them all together again and took the taper-stand from the steward without a word. It was all a dream. If he had been a villain, he might have had her fortune for what he was freely giving back to her; but he had nothing. He had not even begged her not to tell her husband what had happened. It was incomprehensible beyond all explanation; but one fact remained: she had recovered the letters of which the loss had nearly driven her mad, within an hour of finding that they had been stolen. That was the main thing, and nothing else mattered much for a while.

'You have a singular way of serving your master,' she said, as she reached the door of the passage; 'but since

you have appealed to my generosity, I shall say nothing to the Count.'

'I am most grateful to your Excellency.'

He opened the door and held it back while she passed in, and when he had shut it after her he heard the bolt pushed into its slot. Then at last he smiled, for though a bolt is generally considered to be a solid fastening for the inside of a door, this one could easily be moved from without by an unobtrusive little brass button, no bigger than a pea, that moved along a slit narrow enough to pass unnoticed.

Schmidt waited in the chapel two hours. When he knew that the family was at dinner, he opened the passage door noiselessly and twisted together the ends of the wire he had cut. He had been badly frightened, but things had ended well enough; better for him than for the Countess, he thought.

CHAPTER XVII

Nothing happened during the next week; nothing, that is to say, which can be chronicled as an event. But the determination which Maria had formed after her chance meeting with Castiglione gained strength continually. She went to confession at last, and it was a bitter satisfaction to be told that she was in mortal sin because she had whispered those few loving words in the weakness of an instant; she was reminded that if the mere wish to kill was almost as bad as the intention, and that the intention was murder and nothing else, it followed that the most passing wish to be united with any man but her husband was a betrayal of her marriage vow only a little less grave than the worst. She replied that she knew it was. She was warned that she must uproot from her heart every memory of the man she had loved, if she hoped to be forgiven. She bowed her head and answered that she wished with all her soul to do so, and was trying with all her might to succeed.

She had gone once more to the terrible old Capuchin, because she knew what he would say, and wished to hear him say it. Though the name of Padre Bonaventura was known to her and to many, he did not know her and had never seen her face; it was before God that she accused herself and abased herself, and promised to do

better, and most earnestly prayed for help. The monk remembered her without knowing who she was, and before he pronounced the absolution she implored, he said what he believed it his duty to say. It was a short, harsh homily on the abominable wickedness of the rich and great, who were so much better taught and so much more carefully brought up than the poor and the ignorant, and therefore so much the more responsible for their thoughts and actions. The sin of the noble lady was a thousand times greater than the fault of the unlettered hill-woman. Why should a lady of Rome expect to be forgiven more easily than a peasant?

To this also Maria bent her head, and said she came to confession as a sinful woman, with no thought of her own station in life; and at last the Capuchin was satisfied. While she was kneeling in the quiet church just afterwards, he came out of his box and went away, and she watched him, remembering how he had stalked away, in righteous indignation, with his grim old head in the air, after she had come to him the first time. But now he walked quietly and slowly, looking down; and before he disappeared he knelt before the altar a few moments. She knew that he was praying for her, as a good confessor does for each penitent, and she was humbly grateful. Even in her inmost consciousness she did not think critically of what he had said, nor find fault with his scant knowledge of great ladies' hearts.

She did not think she had 'risen higher' now. Her attempt to rise by the purification of her earthly love had been a wretched failure. Henceforth she would

dream no dreams of that sort; not once, in years to come, would she willingly dwell on thoughts of Baldassare del Castiglione.

It was half-past five o'clock when she reached her home again, and on the way another resolution had formed itself, on which she acted at once. She determined to tell her husband everything that had happened before he had come back. Her reason was a practical one, strong enough to warrant the risk she was about to take; for she now distrusted the man Schmidt, who might at any moment turn against her and use the knowledge he had obtained, and ruin Montalto's life by placing her in an utterly false light. It was only natural that the steward should hate her, since she had caught him in the chapel, and before long he would try to get rid of her. Yet she was thinking less of herself now than of Montalto.

She sent for her husband's valet, and told him to beg the Count to come to her as soon as he returned.

An hour later he entered the boudoir, looking rather pale and tired, as she thought. Her resolution wavered for a moment, but soon returned when she remembered the man who had stolen her secret, and who might so terribly misrepresent it. That thought had hindered her from burning the letters as soon as they were again in her possession, and she had put them away in her jewel-case.

She made Montalto sit down near the small fire, and, to his surprise, she locked the door that led into the ball-room before she seated herself beside him.

'We might be interrupted,' she said, in explanation.

'What is the matter, my dear?' her husband asked.

'I have something to tell you,' she answered. 'You must be patient with me, Diego. You must try to understand, though it will be hard. I thought I was doing right, but after a long time I am quite sure that it was wrong.'

'My dear Maria,' Montalto said, 'if your intention was good, you did nothing wrong. You only made a mistake.'

'Thank you.' She was grateful for the trite words, because she knew that he meant them. 'When you came home,' she continued after a short time, 'I told you that I had seen Baldassare, and that we had parted for ever. You said we need not speak of him again.'

'Yes.' Montalto's face became very grave as he nodded and looked at the fire.

'What I told you was true,' she went on. 'The last time we met, we agreed never to see each other again if we could avoid it. That was quite true. But it gave you a wrong impression. You may have thought that after you had gone away to live in Spain we had only met that once.'

Montalto looked at her with a startled expression, but she met his eyes quietly and honestly.

'No, Diego,' she said at once, 'I did nothing that I thought wrong or felt ashamed of.'

He turned to the fire with a sigh of relief, but did not speak.

'He came to Rome a month or more before your

mother died,' she continued. 'I had not seen him since — since that time — you know — long before you first went to your mother. We met by accident. They had persuaded me to take one of the booths at Kermess in the Villa, and he appeared quite unexpectedly. You believe me, don't you, Diego?'

Montalto turned to her and spoke very slowly.

'I shall believe every word you tell me. You never told me an untruth in your life.'

'No, never. But I thank you for trusting me now. It is not every man that would. After he came back' — she was careful not to mention Castiglione's name after the first time — 'I saw him again and again; I thought I hated him, Diego, but I loved him still.'

It was hard to say, but perhaps it was harder to hear. Yet her husband had never known how she had deceived herself into believing that she hated Castiglione, and he did not turn upon her as she had expected. His head sank a little, but he was still watching the burning logs.

'Do you love him now?' he asked with an effort.

'I have promised on my knees and before God to tear every thought of him from my heart.'

There was no mistaking her tone.

'That is enough,' he answered. 'No one can ask more than that of you.'

A short silence followed.

'Is that all, my dear?' he asked presently in a kind tone.

'No. There is more, and it will be harder to understand, perhaps, though it will be easier to say. I found

him greatly changed after all those years; changed for the better, I mean. Then I let myself believe that we could love each other innocently for the rest of our lives, and do no wrong, not even to you.'

'Not even to me.' There was a sudden bitterness in Montalto's voice as he repeated the words.

'I did not think you loved me still, Diego. You had not forgiven me then. I felt that my only duty to you was to bear your name without more reproach, and I did that. There was not a word breathed against me in those years. You know how I lived, and I had no secret; what the world knew was all there was to be known. But when he came back I began to dream of something innocent — that seemed possible.'

The last sentence choked her a little. Montalto turned to her.

'Do you regret your dream now? Do you wish it back?' he asked sorrowfully.

'No!' she said with sudden vehemence. 'It was not right, it was wrong! It was not innocent, it was a temptation! It is gone. I will never think of it again, nor of him, if God will help me to forget.'

'I am trying to help you, too, Maria.'

The words cut her to the quick. He meant them so truly, he spoke them so humbly, he loved her so dearly; yet she felt her flesh creep at his touch and shrank under his least caress, do what she could.

'I know you are, Diego,' she managed to say, and then she collected her strength to tell what was left. 'It lasted a month or six weeks altogether,' she said, going

on quickly. 'He had exchanged into another regiment in order not to be quartered in Rome. He was in Milan then, and he was here on a short leave. He applied to be allowed to come back to the Piedmont Lancers. While he was in Milan we wrote to each other. We promised to be faithful and innocent; we told each other that we would love as spirits love, and meet in heaven. Then your mother died, and you wrote me that first long letter, and I answered it; and on the same day I wrote to him and told him he must not come to Rome, that we must never see each other again because you were going to take me back. But it was too late, the matter had been settled already, and he had to come.'

'Of course,' said Montalto, in a dull tone, when she paused.

'I sent for him then. That was the last time, the time I told you of. He came, and we said good-bye.'

A long pause followed, and Montalto did not move.

'Is that all you wished to tell me?' he asked at length.

'I let him kiss my cheek twice,' Maria said, very low.

This time her husband turned towards her quickly, and she saw how very pale he was.

'Was that when you parted?'

'No! Oh, no! It was in those first few days when he was here on leave.'

Montalto seemed relieved, and his face softened; he was still looking at her, but he did not speak.

'Can you forgive me that?' she asked.

'You meant no harm,' he said. 'You were not think-

ing of doing any wrong, you were only dreaming of an impossible good. There is nothing to forgive.'

'Ah, how good you are to me! How very, very good!'

'It is only justice, and I love you. How can I be unjust to you when I see how hard you are trying to do right?'

'You are one of the best men that ever lived,' said Maria, and for a few seconds she covered her face with her hands. 'Only tell me,' she continued presently, looking up, 'you know all my story now — have I hurt you very much?'

'A little, my dear, but it is over already. Think of what I should have felt if you had not told me these things, and if some enemy, who knew, had told them as an enemy might!'

He, who was often so dull, seemed to have divined her inmost intention. She rose from her seat.

'What is it?' he asked, moving to stand up.

'Wait a moment!'

She went into her dressing-room and returned almost instantly, bringing a large envelope. He was seated again and she stood between him and the fireplace, facing him.

'He wrote me seven letters,' she said. 'Here they are. I give them into your hands. Read them, and you will understand better.'

He took the envelope and held it a moment, looking up to her face with a gentle smile.

'Thank you, my dear,' he said. 'I do not need any proofs in order to believe you.'

He rose then and tried to pass her, to reach the fire, evidently meaning to burn the letters at once.

The tears came suddenly to her eyes without overflowing, as they did sometimes when she was much moved by a generous word or deed, but she caught at his arm as he was in the act of tossing the letters into the flames. The envelope left his hand but fell short and lay on the polished tiles of the hearth. Maria stooped and picked it up.

'No,' she said quickly, 'you must not burn them yet. I know you trust me now, but there is that other possibility. Some enemy of yours or mine may say that we wrote to each other. You must be able to answer that you have the real letters in your keeping.'

'That is true,' said Montalto, and he took the envelope back from her. 'I will seal it and put it away.'

He went to her writing-table, and she followed him to light the little taper in its silver stand and to place the sealing wax before him when he had sat down. He melted it slowly and spread a broad patch upon the overlapping point of the envelope, working the wax neatly round and round till it stiffened, and then putting on more with a little flame, and working it over till the patch softened again.

'Your seal is not ready,' said Maria, glancing at the ring on his finger. 'The wax will get cold.'

He said nothing, but when he was ready he took her own seal, which lay beside the taper-stand, and pressed it upon the wax. When he lifted it, there was a clear impression of Maria's simple monogram, the doubled

letter that began both her names, encircled by a little belt, on which were engraved the words 'Risurgi e Vinci' — meaning 'Rise again and overcome.' They are from the *Paradiso* of Dante.

Once more her eyes grew dim with gratitude, for she knew what he meant by using her seal; there was not to be even the possibility of a doubt in her mind that he might ever open the packet.

He took her pen and wrote on the back, in his stiff and formal handwriting.

'In case of my death, to be given to my wife at once.'

'Then you will burn it, my dear,' he said, showing her what he had written.

As she stood beside him her hand pressed hard upon his thin shoulder, for she was very much touched. He looked up, smiling, slipped the sealed envelope into his pocket and rose.

'That is done,' he said, 'and we need never think of it again.'

'You know what I feel,' she answered softly. 'I cannot say it.'

They went back to the fireplace and stood side by side gazing at the flames. He linked his arm through hers without looking at her, and she did not shrink from his touch, for she was thinking only of his kindness then. He pressed her arm to his side and then withdrew his own and looked at his watch.

'I must be going,' he said.

'Stay a little longer,' said she, and it was the first time she had ever made such a request.

'I wish I could. But there is a lawyer waiting for me, and I must see him before dinner.'

'A lawyer? Is anything wrong? You looked a little tired when you came in. Has anything happened?'

'Yes, my dear, and I wish your judgment were as good as your heart!' He smiled.

'My judgment? What do you mean?'

'Schmidt disappeared four days ago, and we cannot find any trace of him.'

Maria was profoundly surprised.

'Has he taken money?' she asked after a moment.

'That is the question. So far we cannot find anything wrong with his books nor at the bank. But then he is so very "intelligent," you know!'

He laughed a little as he reminded his wife of their conversation at Montalto. It was evident that he did not anticipate any heavy loss.

'He was always a modest young man,' he continued. 'I hope he has not taken more than a modest sum!'

He laughed again, at his own little joke, as slow people do, and Maria laughed too, though rather nervously.

'I should be very sorry if the mistake I made about him caused you any annoyance,' she said.

'Chiefly the trouble of finding a good man to take his place,' Montalto said. 'The lawyer is waiting, my dear.'

He laid his hands on her shoulders before going away and looked into her eyes. She knew he was going to kiss her, and on any other day she might have smiled and turned away to hide the intense repugnance she felt for him. But that was impossible now; she must not even

let her lids droop, as if she did not wish to meet his gaze frankly. Many months ago, Ippolito Saracinesca had told her that in this world it is not enough to do right, but one must also be seen to be doing right. If her eyes had wavered just then, if she had shrunk from her husband's kiss, there was just one possibility that a doubt of her truth might sooner or later creep out of some hiding-place in his memory to accuse her.

But Maria was a woman, and women have quick ways which we do not anticipate. Instead of waiting, with her eyes in his, for him to bend down and kiss her, she put up her hands suddenly to draw his face to hers, and kissed him heartily on both cheeks; to his infinite delight, and not, we may hope, to the detriment of her truthfulness, her recent resolution, or her good faith in any way. For no one can be held responsible for a physical aversion. Many persons really suffer if a cat is in the room, and almost faint if the creature accidentally brushes against them. If any of them read these lines, they will understand, for that is what Maria felt for the man who was her husband, and who loved her almost to folly.

CHAPTER XVIII

Two days later Maria received a letter from Naples, addressed in a round, commercial handwriting. It came with two or three others, of which she guessed the contents, and she opened it first from mere curiosity. No one had ever written her a business letter from Naples.

The envelope contained two sheets of paper. She spread out one of them to read, but at the first glance she uttered an exclamation of horror; what she saw was a photographed copy of one of Castiglione's letters to her. Her fingers relaxed and the first sheet fluttered to the floor.

The second lay on the writing-table, and when she could collect her senses she saw that it was a typewritten communication demanding the immediate payment of one hundred and fifty thousand francs, failing which, the photographed copies of seven letters written to her by the Conte del Castiglione would be reproduced and published simultaneously in two newspapers, in Rome and in Naples. The money was to be forthcoming within exactly eight days in the form of a cheque to the bearer from the National Bank, to be addressed to Signor Carlo Pozzi at the General Post Office in Palermo, not registered. If it was not received within eight days, the Countess would be informed of the fact, and a duplicate of the cheque was to be sent, not registered, to Signor

Paolo Pizzuti at the General Post Office in Messina. If this were not received, the writer would take it for granted that the money had not been sent, and the letters would appear. The photographs were in safe hands, and would inevitably be published at once if any attempt were made to arrest the persons who applied for the letters at the two post offices named, or if, subsequently, any steps were taken to trace the writer, either through the police or otherwise.

Maria's first impulse was to send the money at once. She had been alone in the world so long that she was used to keeping her own accounts, and she knew that she possessed more than the sum demanded, in the form of Government bonds. To take these to the National Bank and get a duplicate cheque in exchange for them would be a simple matter, and the affair would be at an end. For her, the amount was a large one, but since she had come back to her husband she had little use for her own fortune, and did not spend her income. She would certainly not miss the sum. Immediate surrender would save Montalto all anxiety and annoyance.

But two objections to this course presented themselves almost immediately, the one of a moral nature, the other practical. Since she had told her husband everything, he had a right to be consulted. The original letters were in his possession, and no longer in hers; he had trusted her, and she must now go to him for advice, even if it troubled him, as it would, for if she did not consult him he would be justified in resenting her want of confidence in him.

The second consideration was that Leone might some day need her money, for she had not the least idea of the contents of her husband's will. Under Italian law he could not altogether disinherit a child born in wedlock, and even that moiety of his fortune which must come to Leone would be very large. But Maria felt sure that he was aware of the truth, and that many others suspected it; and there were several collateral heirs to the Montalto estates, who would not hesitate to claim much more than the law would ever give them. Besides, there was Leone himself; who could tell by what ill chance he might some day learn the story of his birth? If he ever did, she guessed the man from the boy, and guessed that her son would not keep an hour what was not universally admitted to be his. He would have nothing, then, but what she could leave him.

Yet, if only this second reason had influenced her, she would not have hesitated to pay blackmail and be free. In the course of a few years, by spending little on herself, her fortune would recover from the sudden demand on it. On the other hand, if she hid the truth from her husband, even to save him, and if he ever discovered it, he might resent the concealment bitterly.

It was morning, and she went to his study at once, taking the papers with her, and she told him how Schmidt had stolen the letters and kept them some time, and how she had caught him just when he was bringing them back. It had never occurred to her that he had copied them, still less that he had photographed them. She begged

her husband to let her send the money at once and end the matter.

He had listened with a look of increasing annoyance, and she laid the sheets on the table before him when she had finished; but he pushed them back to her without glancing at them, for if he had done so he could hardly have helped reading some words of Castiglione's letter.

'It is very well done,' he said. 'Schmidt is a clever fellow. But if you had told me at once, he would have been in prison by this time. He disappeared on the third day after you found him in the chapel. You must not send the money on any account.'

Maria saw that he was more displeased than alarmed at a possible danger which looked very serious to her.

'I am very sorry,' she said penitently. 'What is to be done?'

'I cannot tell. It is a matter, too, on which I cannot ask advice. There are things of which one does not wish to speak, even to a lawyer.'

He was evidently very much annoyed; but she saw that she had done right in coming to him, though it was perhaps too late.

'But something must be done!' she protested.

'Of course we must do something,' he answered, with manifest impatience. 'But it is worse than useless to act hastily. Give me time! I shall find a way.'

The words were not unkind, but his manner was petulant, like that of a nervous man who is interrupted when very busy, and is made to take a great deal of trouble against his inclination. Montalto had always been in-

clined to procrastinate, though he could show a good deal of energy when forced to act.

'Let me send the money, Diego,' said Maria earnestly.

'Certainly not. I forbid you to send it! Do you understand?'

Maria shrank a little, for she was hurt by the words and the tone. Was not her money her own, to use as she pleased? She checked a quick reply that rose to her lips.

'I shall obey you,' she answered, an instant later, as quietly as she could.

He was moving his papers nervously and aimlessly from place to place on the table, arranging and disarranging them, but he looked up quickly now.

'I did not mean to speak as I did, my dear,' he said. 'Your money is yours, and you will never need it again. You have a right to use it as you will. The truth is, I am occupied with a very complicated question. Forgive me, if I was rude.'

'Diego!' She stretched her hand out on the smooth table, instantly reconciled.

He patted it twice, and smiled rather absently. But he was evidently preoccupied, and she rose to go.

'We will talk over this unfortunate affair after luncheon,' he said. 'Will you take me for a drive? It will be easy to talk in the carriage.'

'Yes, we will go for a drive,' she answered.

Standing by the table, and watching his nervous hands that were busy with the papers again, she unconsciously read the clearly engrossed superscription on a heavy lawyer's envelope:—

THE WILL OF HIS EXCELLENCY DON DIEGO SILANI, COUNT OF MONTALTO

Maria bit her lip as she turned away, realising what that meant. It was no wonder that her husband was preoccupied just then, for she could not help suspecting that he had been in the act of drafting a new will when she had interrupted him, and she guessed that its tenor would be very different from that of the old one which lay before him, and which must have been made a good many years ago, for the thick envelope had the unmistakable, faded look of a document long put away with others. He had just said, too, that she would never need her own money again; but he had also told her that the matter was very complicated.

As she moved away he rose quickly to open the door. That was one of those formal little acts of courtesy which he had rarely omitted since they had been married.

She went back to her own room much more disturbed than when she had left it ten minutes earlier. Her knowledge of her husband's mind and character told her that he would find arguments for putting off anything like real action until it might be too late to act at all; and yet her own ultimate advantage was doubtless the very reason why he had resented being disturbed.

It was not her fault if another image rose before her mental vision just then; but she drove it away so fiercely that it disappeared at once.

That afternoon, when they were driving together, they came to no conclusion. Montalto was afraid of being

overheard by the men on the box, and he talked in French. But he was less at home in that language than most Romans are, and found it much more easy to say what he knew how to say, than to express what he really meant. Maria did not know Spanish, which he now spoke better than Italian, from having lived in Spain and spoken it with his mother during so many years. Maria chafed as she felt that precious time was passing, and that such a wretched obstacle as a servant not quite certainly within hearing was making it impossible to talk freely.

In the evening he was tired, and at first almost refused to refer to the subject. He said at last, however, that Schmidt was evidently in collusion with the South Italian gangs of malefactors, with the Camorra of Naples and the Mala Vita of Palermo. The letter showed this plainly enough, he said, and those people were capable of anything, especially including murder. To try and catch Signor Carlo Pozzi or Signor Paolo Pizzuti would be folly; no such persons existed, and if any one representing himself as either at a post office were actually arrested, it would be impossible to extract a word from him. Those men would go silently to prison for years, rather than betray an accomplice and be knived or shot in the back for it within twenty-four hours. There were many instances of this, Montalto said, and Schmidt had given another proof of his intelligence in demanding that the money should be paid through the Camorra or the Mala Vita. He added petulantly that he wished Schmidt were with him still, because only Schmidt could be clever enough to catch himself.

Maria tried to laugh, and this put her husband in a better humour. He said the simplest thing was to have a circular note from the Chief of Police sent to the Italian press, informing all the responsible editors of the dailies that an outrageous plot was on foot to attack the reputation of a lady of Rome by offering for publication certain alleged reproductions of letters already in the possession of her husband, who would bring an action, in the most public way, against any newspaper that even alluded to them. Maria answered that such a plan would succeed admirably with the respectable papers; but that, unfortunately, there were some which were just the contrary, and whose owners desired nothing better in the way of an advertisement than to be sued for libel, for collusion in forgery accessory after the fact, or for any other scandalous offence, because nothing would delight a certain class of their readers and increase their circulation so much as to see the name of the Countess of Montalto or any other Roman lady dragged through the mud.

This was unfortunately true, for Rome was much disturbed at that time by a revolutionary element of the most despicable sort, which was stirring up strife in every way, and was at the bottom of the frequent strikes, almost every one of which led to some open disturbance little short of a riot. That was the public that supported the disreputable papers, Maria said, and it would treble the circulation of any one of them that published a scandalous attack on decent people.

Maria knew far more about the condition of Rome and Italy than Montalto. He had exiled himself from

his country for years, and had taken little interest in what happened there, whereas his wife had always been on intimate terms with Giuliana Parenzo, whose husband was now Under Secretary for Foreign Affairs, after having been connected with the Government ever since he had left the University of Bologna.

It did not occur to Montalto to smile at the thought of having spent some time every evening in giving Maria a summary of the news he gathered chiefly from the Vatican newspapers. On the contrary, he felt quite sure that he understood the situation much better than she did, and he suddenly forgot the matter in hand and tried to launch upon one of those arguments in favour of the restoration of the Temporal Power, in which he delighted to engage with Monsignor Saracinesca.

But Maria refused to be led so far, and only said it was a matter she did not understand. She saw it was useless to bring him back to the point just then, so she listened quietly while he talked alone, till it was much later than usual. Then he solemnly conducted her to her own door, kissed her hand with a formal bow, while pressing it affectionately, and bade her good-night.

She felt almost desperate for a little while after she had dismissed her maid, for the first of the eight days was gone, and she saw no reason why Montalto should be any nearer to a conclusion a week hence than now. When he thought that a question concerned his conscience or the welfare of his soul, even in the most distant manner, she knew that he could make up his mind in twenty-four

hours as to what was right, and would certainly act on his decision at once. But in other matters eight days would seem to him as good as a year, and having generously accepted Maria's assurance that the letters were in themselves perfectly innocent, he could hardly believe that there was any real danger. It seemed almost certain that he would reach no conclusion, and that they would be published before he could be induced to take any steps.

Again, as she lay awake in the quiet night, Maria saw Castiglione's resolute face before her as clearly as if he had been standing in the room. She always slept in the dark, but she sat up in bed and covered her eyes with both her hands, and prayed aloud that the vision might not disturb her. She was so sure that he would have known what to do at once, and would have done it with ruthless energy.

Her prayers, or her will, or both, drove away the thought of him, and by and by she fell asleep in spite of her trouble, and did not wake till daylight.

She would not go to her husband's study again in the morning, for he was without doubt still busy over the drafting of his will, and it would be foolish to run the risk of disturbing him. She felt very helpless. She had last seen the letters on that night in the chapel, when she had hastily glanced over them to be sure that nothing was missing; for when she had gone back to her room she had resolutely locked them up. That had been the night following the day of her meeting with Castiglione in the lift, when she had struggled so hard with herself, and had

made her great resolution to put away his memory for the rest of her life.

The phrases came back to her now, some vividly, some only very vaguely; but there was the photograph of a part of one to help her. She tried to think of herself as another woman coming to her for help, in order to judge coldly of the effect such words must make on any one who should read them without knowing the truth she had called innocent; and in an instant it was dreadfully clear to her that they could only be interpreted in one way. Castiglione had never had the gift of writing; he had not been able to speak eloquently and convincingly of a spiritual love in which he could not believe. He had only found words to tell her that he loved her, that she was his queen of love, his idol, the saint on the altar of his heart, that he would do his best to be what she wished him to be, and that he honoured and respected her above and beyond all things visible and invisible.

Would any one believe that such language was innocent? Would any one but her husband have believed her when she said it was? Giuliana Parenzo had told her plainly that such a relation as she had dreamt of was impossible; so had Monsignor Saracinesca; and the implacable Capuchin had refused his absolution so long as she even entertained the thought of it. The world would most assuredly not believe that she had been without fault during those weeks; it was both futile and foolish to hope that it would.

The day passed as she had expected. She met Montalto at luncheon, and Leone was at the table as usual,

so that it was impossible to allude to the subject. Her husband looked at the handsome boy affectionately from time to time, and then at Maria, and talked of little matters; Leone chattered of horses, and Maria encouraged him, because she herself could find so little to say.

'Why don't you have a racing stable, papa?' he asked at last. 'You know quite enough about it, I'm sure; and when I'm a little bigger I could be your jockey! It would be such fun, and between us we should win everything!'

Maria laughed a little. Her husband smiled kindly and shook his head.

'My dear little man,' he said, 'when you are the master of Montalto and have a boy of your own, you may keep a racing stable if you like and let your son ride races for you. But I am not going to encourage you to break your neck! Do you remember that poor lad who was killed at the Capannelle?'

'Yes,' Leone answered, growing suddenly grave, for he had been taken to the races for the first time on that day, and had seen the fatal accident. 'But I shall never be the master, papa, you know.'

Maria's face changed, and she looked down at her plate.

'Why not?' asked her husband, smiling again.

'Because I couldn't be, unless you were dead. And that's ridiculous!'

'We shall see, my boy, we shall see,' answered Montalto. 'At all events we need not talk about dying yet. You are quite right about that.'

The words made a deep impression on Maria, who knew that he was making a new will. He could only mean that Leone was to have Montalto, which it would have been in his power to leave to another branch of his family, or indeed to any one he pleased; and Montalto meant everything. She could not doubt that he knew perfectly well what he was doing; he had added one more generous deed to the many he had done in the course of that large forgiveness that had brought him back to her.

He could do such things as this, and yet he could not lift his hand to hinder a disaster that might wreck the honour of his name, with her own, and Leone's. He went out after luncheon, saying that he had an appointment, and she did not see him till dinner-time, when Leone always had his supper with them, unless some one came to dine. And later he was in the loving mood she dreaded most. The second of the eight days had passed and nothing had been done yet. After two or three more like these, the situation would become absolutely desperate.

Maria made up her mind that night that if her husband came to no decision in twenty-four hours, she would go to the National Bank and buy the cheques. After all it was better to disobey Montalto's express injunction, if obedience was to mean ruin.

She longed intensely for help, but there was none in sight. She could not tell Giuliana all that had passed between her husband and herself to bring about the present situation; still less could she appeal to Monsignor Saracinesca, who knew very little of the truth.

On the next day Montalto talked again about a circular notice to the press, saying there was plenty of time, because the blackmailer's letter did not say that the letters would be published in eight days, but that if the money had not been received by that time a second demand would be sent to Maria, on the supposition that the first draft might have been lost, which would mean a lapse of several days more.

'Let us go together to the Chief of Police,' entreated Maria. 'We need only say that it concerns certain old letters, in your possession, which might compromise me.'

'That is quite impossible, my dear, without very mature reflection,' answered Montalto, with exasperating calm.

'But surely we have been reflecting these three days! If you do not go to the police, how can you ever get a circular sent to the press?'

'But, my dear child, there is really no such hurry!'

He did not often call her his 'dear child'; it was one of his small ways of showing that he was impatient, and she understood at once that it was of no use to insist.

'Diego,' she said, 'unless you can find some better way, I shall send the money to-morrow, although you forbade me to do so, and I promised to obey you.'

'My dear Maria,' he cried, almost angrily, 'how you take up every word I say! I certainly apologised to you for using such an expression as "forbid," so, for heaven's sake, let us say no more about it! I only beg you not to submit to this outrageous extortion. I entreat you not to send the money. That is all I mean to say.'

'I'm very sorry,' Maria answered; 'but unless some better way can be found, I shall have to pay.'

'It is madness,' said Montalto; 'pure madness!'

And, to her great surprise, he got up abruptly and left the room without another word, evidently much displeased.

For the third time she saw Castiglione's resolute face before her, as distinctly as if he had been in the room, and the vision came so unexpectedly that she felt her heart leap, and drew a sharp breath. It was so sudden that a few seconds passed before she made that honest effort of will that was necessary to drive away the thought of him. When it was gone she felt more desperate than before. She went and stood at a window that looked over the square; it was past eleven o'clock in the morning, the day was rainy, and the square was almost empty. Three cabs were on the stand, and the huge umbrellas concealed the dozing cabmen. The horses in their shiny waterproofs hung their heads far down, as if they were contemplating their more or less broken knees, a melancholy sight indeed.

Here and there a stray pedestrian came in sight for a few moments, hurrying along by the wall and presently disappearing into a side street; a poor woman with a torn green shawl over her head dripping with water, a student with an umbrella and some books under his arm, a policeman in an indiarubber hood and cloak, a priest in a long black overcoat and shoes with silver buckles. He had no umbrella, and he made straight for one of the three cabs, diving in under the hood and apron with

more agility than dignity. Maria watched the dismal scene with a sort of depressed interest. Nothing made any difference, till she could see clearly what was right, for she was sure that the question of right and wrong was involved. Would it be wrong to pay no attention to her husband's entreaty that the money should not be sent? Or would it be right? Or would it be neither, and yet be a mistake? She groped for some answer and could find none. She wanted some strong and energetic friend to help her, some one with decision and character, even if not very wise, some man who would fight for her or tell her how to defend herself.

She crossed the room and came back aimlessly, and looked out once more. Her husband would have told her that even if she could not be seen from below, a Roman lady must never look out of a window in town. She could hear him say it! But when she looked this time, another of the cabs was gone. Her old travelling clock on the writing-table struck eleven and chimed the quarter; she turned and looked at it, and her mind was made up. There was still one cab left on the stand, and there was still time. Three minutes later she was downstairs and under the dripping hood, with the leathern apron hooked up as high as her chin.

'What address, Excellency?' inquired the porter, respectfully.

'The Capuchins, in Piazza Barberini.'

The porter repeated the words to the cabman in his sternest tones, as if he were ordering that her Excellency

should be taken directly to prison, and the cab rumbled out from under the deep archway.

She was not going for the sake of confession, for she was not conscious of having anything on her conscience, but it would be just as well to go through what would be little more than a form, in order to ask what her duty was. That seemed to be the point. At a very critical juncture in her life she turned neither to Giuliana Parenzo, her intimate friend, nor to Don Ippolito Saracinesca; he was Montalto's friend, and she could not put him in the position of advising her to do what was precisely contrary to her husband's wishes; and, moreover, courageous as he was, she did not feel that he was a fighting man. She went to the grim, uncompromising old monk; according to his lights he would tell her what he thought, without the slightest regard for her feelings.

Maria would not have admitted that Montalto's hesitation filled her with contempt. How could she despise the husband who overwhelmed her with undeserved kindness and almost fantastic generosity?

I once knew a most refined and cultivated epicure who sometimes felt an irresistible craving for a piece of coarse dry bread and a raw onion, and would go out secretly and buy those things, and eat them greedily in the privacy of his own dressing-room, after locking the door lest his own servant should catch him. I have also heard of women who would rather be beaten black and blue by their husbands than be treated with indifference.

At that juncture Maria's conscience and heart craved stronger and rougher stuff than was to be found in

her husband's nervous and hesitating character. She wanted some one to direct her authoritatively, even rudely, and she went to the Capuchin because she recognised in him the born fighting man as well as the uncompromising ascetic. If he thought she ought to defend herself energetically, he would tell her that she must fight, or be guilty of the mortal sin of sloth; if he believed that mortification of the flesh was necessary to the salvation of her soul she was sure that he would order her to walk barefoot from Rome to Naples, and would be very much surprised if she objected to such a penance. He had not outlived the thirteenth century, in which his Order had been founded. What had been good for sinners then was excellent for them now. If civilisation was to extend to morality and change the soul's requirements, then the Church must change too, and as this was manifestly impossible, the hypothesis was contrary to sense. His reasoning was sound, though his application of the truth he demonstrated was sometimes severe to the point of being quite impracticable. He shook his head, for instance, when he was told that various bacilli flourished on the pavement of his church, and that it was not hygienic for penitents to kiss the stones twenty-five times between the door and the altar rail. He said there had been no bacilli when he was young, and that the floor was swept every day.

Maria asked for Padre Bonaventura. The lay brother did not know whether he was in the monastery at that hour. Would he kindly go and ask? Certainly, but would the lady kindly give her name? Maria hesitated.

'Please say that a Roman lady is here who confessed to him ten days ago, and also last May.

The lay brother hastened away, slapping the damp marble pavement with his wet sandals, and the Countess did not wait long. The monk appeared almost immediately, and went before her to a confessional box, just bending his head a little as he passed her, but not even glancing at her unveiled face. Her message had explained enough, and he had no wish to discover her identity. He probably thought she had already failed in her good resolution and had come to tell him so.

But he was mistaken; though he asked her several searching questions, she answered them all without hesitation, and then told him the story of the letters and spoke of her husband's hesitations and of her own fears; and at last she put the case directly: Would it be wrong to act contrary to his expressed wish or not? That was what she had come to ask.

The monk was silent for a few moments, and then asked her a question in his harsh, unforgiving tone.

'What is the character of the man who wrote those letters? Is he what is called a man of honour?'

Maria, on the other side of the perforated brass plate, straightened herself unconsciously as if she had been offended in the street.

'He is brave and honourable,' she answered proudly, after an instant.

'Very well. I suppose he is a gentleman at large, a noble without occupation in life, is he not?'

'On the contrary, he is an officer in active service.'

'Very good. So much the better.'

She thought the old monk's voice softened a little. She was quite sure it was less harsh. He had pronounced the words 'a noble without occupation' with an accent of profound contempt, and Maria did not see how the fact of being an officer in the Italian Army could be a recommendation in the eyes of a bare-footed friar whose political opinions might reasonably be thought to be those of Gregory Seventh or Pope Alexander Third. But Maria said nothing, and waited for another question. It came, in a kindly tone.

'If you thought I could help you in your trouble, should you have any objection to telling me the officer's name?'

Maria was so much surprised that she did not answer at once. In all her experience of confessors — and her life had brought her to many — none had ever inquired the name of any person she spoke of.

'Not yours,' the monk added, before she spoke. 'I do not know who you are, and I never shall try to find out. But if you will tell me the name of the officer, I think I can help you, provided you will trust me. I cannot advise you to send money to the thief, any more than I can suggest any other plan of action for you. I can only offer my own help.'

'But what can you do?' Maria asked in a puzzled tone.

'Have you finished your confession?'

'Yes.'

'Say the Act of Contrition.'

Maria obeyed, and immediately the monk pronounced the words of absolution. When all was finished, and after a short pause, he spoke again.

'This matter on which you have consulted me has nothing to do with the confessional,' he said. 'Perhaps you would like to go and sit down quietly for a few minutes and think it over. I will wait in the chapel, by the door of the sacristy. If you decide to trust me, come back and tell me the officer's name and give me some address where I may find him, for I must see him alone. If you decide not to do this, you need only leave the church without coming back to me. I shall understand.'

'Yes. Thank you. I will go and collect my thoughts.'

She rose, went to a little distance, and sat down on a straw chair. It was all very strange, but the stern old Capuchin inspired her with respect and confidence. She could trust him at least not to lead her into doing anything wrong, and if it were not wrong that he should go from her to the man she loved, she could allow herself to believe that a sort of link was made which was better than utter estrangement. Even that did not seem to be quite without danger, but the monk was there between them, austere and unforgiving. She left her chair very soon and went back to the chapel, where he was kneeling on the step of the altar. As she came near he rose slowly to his feet, and she looked at his face attentively for the first time. He had a rough-hewn head, with great gaunt features that made her think of an old eagle. She came to him, and looked up trustfully as she spoke.

'His name is Baldassare del Castiglione, and he is a captain in the Piedmont Lancers. I do not know where he lives.'

'I can get his address from the barracks. Will you come here to-morrow evening, towards twenty-three o'clock or half-past?'

'Yes, I will be here. Thank you.'

She had a very vague idea as to what time twenty-three o'clock might be, for she belonged to the younger generation, and she was going to ask him to tell her, but he left her without waiting for her to speak again, and disappeared into the sacristy.

As she went out of the church she heard the midday gun, and all the bells began to ring. It was still raining, and she trod daintily and packed herself into the dripping cab and went home, wondering whether any woman she knew had lived a life so strange as hers, or had ever accepted help from such an unlikely quarter.

After all, it was but to wait one day more, and that would be the fourth, and the draft could still reach Palermo in time.

CHAPTER XIX

On the following morning Castiglione's orderly had a severe shock. The Captain had been in the saddle early, and hard at work, and as it had rained heavily on the previous day and night, he and his charger had come in looking as if they had taken a mud-bath together. If Castiglione had known Greek, he might have thought of Hector declining Hecuba's invitation to go up and pray at the temple of Zeus, on the ground that he was not fit to be seen. The orderly was doing what he could for boots and breeches when the bell rang. He opened the door and beheld an old Capuchin monk whose gaunt head towered far above his own. But this was not what surprised him, for mendicant brothers and nuns of various charitable Orders came at intervals to ask for alms at every landing of the apartment house. When Castiglione was in, he gave them a few pennies; his chum rarely gave anything. To-day Castiglione was at home and his friend was out; this meant pennies.

'I will ask the Captain,' said the trooper civilly, leaving the door open and turning to go into the sitting-room.

Then came the shock.

'Excuse me, but I wish to see the Conte del Castiglione on private business,' said the monk. 'Be good enough to give him my card.'

Now the trooper was a young man who came of decent people in Umbria, and had been brought up in the fear of God, and went to hear a mass now and then on a Sunday when he had time. But the idea that a barefooted friar could ever, under any conceivable circumstances, have private business with an officer of the Piedmont Lancers had never presented itself to him. He stood staring at the card like an idiot.

'That is my name,' the monk said impatiently. 'Padre Bonaventura of the Capuchins.'

'I can read,' answered the orderly, offended.

'But apparently,' retorted the monk, 'you cannot walk. Now take my card to the Captain, and say that I must see him on private business of the utmost importance to him, and at once. Right about face, march!'

The order was delivered in such a commanding tone, and with such a military air, that the trooper obeyed mechanically, swung round on his heels, and tramped into the sitting-room with the card and the message, shutting the door behind him. When he reappeared a moment later, he left it open, stood at attention while the monk went in, and then shut it after him. He returned to his master's boots fully resolved to play at the public lottery with the numbers corresponding to 'Capuchin,' 'officer,' and 'surprise' in the Book of Dreams, which contains the correct numbers for everything under the sun except winning.

The sunshine was streaming into the sitting-room when Padre Bonaventura entered, and Castiglione stood near

the door to receive him, in slippers and a brown dressing-gown of nearly the same colour as his visitor's frock.

'As your business is urgent, Father, you will excuse my appearance,' he said politely, but with distinct coldness, for he was almost as much surprised as his orderly had been. 'May I ask what brings you to see me?'

Padre Bonaventura looked round the room, and then at Castiglione.

'Shall we be interrupted here?' he inquired. 'My errand is very private.'

Castiglione's bright blue eyes scrutinised the monk's great head and eagle features. Being tolerably satisfied that the man was a genuine Capuchin and not a disguised thief, he opened the door and called to his orderly.

'Let no one come in,' he said, and he came back at once.

The two sat down on straight chairs by a table and looked at each other.

'I come to you on behalf of a Roman lady,' the monk began.

'A lady!'

Castiglione moved and his face hardened at once. He thought he had been mistaken after all, and that his visitor was some scoundrel in disguise, whom he should presently throw downstairs or hand over to the police.

'I do not know her name,' continued Padre Bonaventura with perfect calm. 'She only told me yours yesterday. She has been to confess to me three times since last May. She is in great danger and you must help her.'

A romantic foreigner might have scented some strange

mystery of the imaginary Italian life described by English poets. Castiglione, who knew his own country well, only suspected that a fraud was being attempted, with a view to extracting money from him; or else that the monk was the ignoble emissary of some one of the fair and free who live between two worlds and feed the altar of Ashtaroth with human sacrifice.

'Unless you can be more explicit,' he said coldly, 'I shall not listen to any more of this.'

An angry light came into the old Capuchin's deep-set eyes, for he understood what Castiglione was thinking. But he checked the retort and told the facts quickly.

'The lady has seven letters written to her by you during last April and May.'

The soldier's manner changed instantly.

'Have you come from her to bring them back to me, Father?' he asked sadly.

'No. They were stolen by a steward, photographed, and returned. The man has absconded, and he, or his accomplices, demand a hundred and fifty thousand francs; if the money is not paid in four days, the letters will be published here and in Naples.'

'Not if I am alive,' said Castiglione, whose face was not good to see just then, though he sat quite quietly in his chair.

Padre Bonaventura was so much pleased with this answer that he actually smiled. It was rather a grim performance of its kind, but it was unmistakably meant to express satisfaction. The Captain had turned out to be the sort of man he had hoped to find.

'May I say a few words more?' he asked.

'Certainly. I must have more details. Does her husband know of this?'

The Capuchin told him the story as he had heard it from Maria's lips, omitting nothing. He had an extremely good memory. Castiglione noted the names to which the drafts were to be addressed. Padre Bonaventura pointed out that it would be worse than useless to pay the money for reproductions which could be multiplied and used to extort more.

'Is that all, Father?' asked Castiglione.

'I have a word to say, Captain,' returned the monk, 'first as one man to another, and then as a priest. So far as the one is concerned we shall agree, for you are evidently a man of honour; as for the rest, I presume your views about priests are those of most young military men.'

'They are,' Castiglione admitted.

'That being the case, we shall probably not agree. But as you, when under orders, would do your duty in your profession, so I must do mine.'

'That is just. Pray speak freely.'

'As one man to another, I only have to say what I see you already understand. You wrote those letters to a married woman. She should have burnt them, it is true; but she did not. If she is compromised by the consequences, the fault is ultimately yours. If there is a breath upon her honour, there will be a stain on yours.'

'You put things plainly, for a priest,' said Castiglione.

'In that, I do not speak as a monk, but as a man, Captain.'

'And very much like a soldier. What you say is true, and I shall act with the conviction that my own honour is in danger.'

'It is not every man that would do that,' said the monk thoughtfully. 'Most of you, in your class, would say that the fault was the lady's in keeping dangerous letters, not yours in writing them. I come to the second point.'

'You have something to say from the point of view of religion, I understand,' said Castiglione gravely. 'I shall listen with respect, though I may not agree with you.'

'Thank you. In an affair of this kind an officer may always be placed in such a position as to believe it his duty to fight a duel.'

'With an absconding steward and a blackmailer?' Castiglione smiled.

'No. With the lady's husband or brother.'

'Nothing could be more utterly unlikely in this case.'

'Nevertheless, as a priest, and because I have been the means of inciting you to action, I ask you to give me your word that you will not be led into a duel.'

'I cannot promise that,' answered Castiglione. 'That is a question about which a priest and a soldier cannot possibly agree. Forgive me for saying that you know no more of my profession than I do of yours, Father.'

'Perhaps. But you may be wrong.'

The old man turned back the left sleeve of his loose

and threadbare brown frock. Castiglione started slightly as he looked, for the monk's arm was gone.

'I left it at Aspromonte, in the sleeve of a red shirt,' he said quietly, 'and I was in orders already. I made submission afterwards. Perhaps a priest and a soldier may yet agree.'

Castiglione held out his hand across the table, and Padre Bonaventura took it frankly.

'I beg your pardon,' said the Captain. 'I can promise an old soldier what I would never promise a priest. I do not foresee any chance of a duel, but if the possibility of one arises, I will do my very best to avoid it; I will go as far as I can without being a disgrace to the regiment.'

'Thank you,' answered the monk. 'I know that is the most I can expect. As for what you are to do, I cannot advise you, for you know this modern world better than I. The lady will come late this afternoon to hear the result of the step I have taken.'

'Tell her from me ——'

'Stop, Captain!' The monk interrupted him sternly. 'I will take no word from you to her. Whatever you choose to say, you say to me, and to me only.'

'Yes — you are right. I repeat what I first said, then. The letters shall not be published while I am alive to hinder it. If there is any risk, it will not be in the way of a duel, so the one promise does not interfere with the other. When the matter is settled, shall I write to you or go and see you?'

'In no case write,' answered Padre Bonaventura.

'My share in this matter ends here, and I need neither hear from you nor see you again. If you do not find a way to make the publication of those letters impossible,' he concluded, speaking slowly as he rose to his feet, 'you are not the man I take you for.'

Castiglione smiled at the wholesale directness of the final speech, but only nodded in reply, and accompanied his visitor to the outer door with evident respect. Hearing steps, the orderly dropped the boots and sprang out of his little den.

'Good-bye, Father, and thank you,' said Castiglione, shaking his hand warmly.

The trooper could not believe his eyes and ears, and stood open-mouthed, grinning with astonishment. As the door closed, his master saw his face and felt a strong desire to box his ears. But the Captain's character had changed a good deal of late.

He laid a heavy hand on the young soldier's shoulder.

'When you meet him again, salute him,' he said sternly. 'That old monk was with Garibaldi, and lost his left arm at Aspromonte.'

'Yes, sir!'

Thereupon the orderly went back to the boots with a very grave face.

But Castiglione returned to the sitting-room and did not call his man for half an hour, during which time he dressed himself without the latter's help, as he often did. It was noon when he went out, and the day was fine. Whatever he had determined to do, he was in no great hurry, for he strolled along at a leisurely pace, enjoying

the sunshine and the bright air after the rain. But there was no hesitation as to the direction he meant to take, and he neither slackened his walk nor hastened it till he reached the door of the Marchesa di Parenzo's pretty house, when it was a quarter-past twelve.

He asked if she were alone, and on being informed that she was, he told the man to inquire whether she could receive him for a few moments. She would guess well enough that only an important matter could bring him at such an hour. He found her in her sitting-room, for the elder boys had not come home from school and the smaller children were already at their dinner. As usual, she wore a wonderfully fitting frock, that looked as if it had just left the hands of a consummate artist, and an exquisite little pin, of a perfectly new design, fastened the tie which was in the fashion for women that winter.

'I hope you will stay to luncheon,' she said, as soon as they had shaken hands. 'Sigismondo is coming, and there will be no one else but the boys.'

'You are very kind, but I can only stay a few minutes,' Castiglione answered, wondering how many of the women he knew would take the trouble to look their best merely for their husbands and their children. 'I came to ask a question which may seem strange to you. Can you tell me anything about that steward of Montalto's who has absconded?'

Giuliana's quiet eyes examined his face attentively. The question was certainly not one to which she could object; but though she had always felt inclined to like

him, she had always disapproved of him, and she had distrusted his intentions towards Maria since he had returned to Rome. To the womanly woman he appealed as a particularly manly man; to the virtuous matron, far above the faintest breath of gossip, he represented the wicked and heartless tempter, going about to destroy.

'Yes,' she answered, 'I heard something about Orlando Schmidt yesterday. Teresa Crescenzi has a story, as usual. She says that he played in some place where there is a roulette and lost a great deal of money.'

'Oh! That is interesting, if it is true. I wonder how she found it out.'

'I have forgotten. I daresay she did not tell us. Sigismondo will remember the whole story, if you will only wait till he comes in.'

'I'm sorry, but I cannot stay. Perhaps I had better go and ask Donna Teresa herself. Are you sure she did not tell you where the gambling den was?'

'I think she mentioned Via Belsiana,' answered the Marchesa, making an effort of memory. 'For my part, I did not know that such places existed in Rome.'

'At all events you have put me on the right track. Thank you very much, and good-bye.'

His visit had not lasted five minutes. He hailed a cab and drove to Teresa Crescenzi's door, and asked to see her.

She also was very smartly dressed, but with less taste than the Marchesa. She was alone and was smoking a cigarette when Castiglione entered the little drawing-room of her apartment.

'Do stay to luncheon,' she cried, shaking hands effusively. 'De Maurienne is coming, and there will be no one else! You know him, of course.'

'Yes, I know de Maurienne,' answered Castiglione, judging that the invitation was only meant to forestall any surprise on his part if the Frenchman appeared; 'but I cannot stay to-day, thank you. I have come to you for some information, because you always know the truth about everything that happens, and when you are in a good humour you tell it.'

'I am in a good humour,' she laughed, and blew smoke towards him.

'Where is that gambling den at which Montalto's steward lost money before he decamped the other day?'

Again Teresa laughed and blew another little cloud at him.

'Why do you ask me that?'

'Perhaps I might be thinking of risking a little money at roulette myself,' suggested Castiglione.

'No,' answered Teresa thoughtfully. 'You are not that sort of man. Besides,' she added with another laugh, 'if you were, I would not be accessory to leading innocence astray. You must give some better reason. Are you playing detective for amusement? Are you trying to catch Orlando Schmidt?'

'Oh, no!' Castiglione spoke with perfect sincerity, and laughed in his turn.

'What will you do for me if I tell you?' inquired Teresa playfully.

'Anything in reason, and honourable.'

'Oh! You think I may be unreasonable and dishonourable!'

'A woman's idea of honour is not always the same as a man's, you know!'

'I should think not!' cried Teresa fervently.

'You see!'

'You are a good swordsman, are you not, Balduccio?'

'Fair. Why do you ask?'

'Perhaps, if you would agree to fight a little duel for me — only if it were necessary — I might tell you what you are so anxious to know!'

'At my age, and in my regiment, we do not fight duels except for very grave reasons,' answered Castiglione.

'Only a little innocent encounter,' laughed Teresa. 'Just to scratch a man's hand or arm! What is that for a brave man and a good swordsman like you? Besides, I have made up my mind. I was only joking at first, but since you do not like the idea, I refuse to tell you what you wish to know. I have stated my condition, and you won't accept it. I believe you're afraid!'

'Really!' exclaimed Castiglione, beginning to be seriously annoyed.

'Oh, no! It is of no use to argue! That or nothing! Either you are afraid, or you are not! I call you a coward!'

She turned away to throw the end of her cigarette into the fireplace. Castiglione moved and saw Monsieur de Maurienne, who had entered unannounced in time to hear the last words. Teresa had seen him, too.

'I fear I am intruding, Madame,' he said stiffly, and he bowed a little to them both.

He was a middle-sized and slightly built man of thirty-five, with somewhat intellectual features; he had soft brown hair and moustaches and he wore glasses. What he said was warranted by the tone of mingled irritation and contempt, in which Teresa had spoken, even more than by the words, since some women think themselves privileged to insult men. But Teresa held out her hand to him.

'Intruding? My dear friend, what an idea! You have come just at the right moment! Balduccio said something to me which I shall certainly not repeat, and I told him he was a coward. That is all. It is of no consequence!'

De Maurienne looked at Castiglione for some explanation, and evidently expecting one, but the officer was going away without giving one, which was probably his best course.

'That is what it means to be an unprotected woman!' cried Teresa, in a tone that announced approaching tears.

'What do you mean, Donna Teresa?' asked Castiglione sternly, turning back as he spoke.

'What right have you to come and say such insulting things to me? In my own house, with no one to defend me!' She was sobbing now, though there was a marked deficiency of tears. 'Go!' she almost screamed. 'Go, I say! Never speak to me again!'

'I can only believe you are quite mad,' said Castiglione coldly.

Thereupon he bowed and went out. He had left the apartment and was slowly descending the marble stairs when he heard quick footsteps behind him. He stopped, looked up, and saw de Maurienne coming down; he knew what that meant, and waited.

'This cannot end here, sir,' said the Frenchman.

'It must,' returned Castiglione with great emphasis. 'I see that you wish to call me to account, but I assure you that nothing will induce me to fight about such a matter.'

'Nothing, sir?'

'Nothing, sir.'

'Then I have the honour to suggest that the lady had some ground for the assertion she made, sir.' The Frenchman spoke quietly and coolly.

Castiglione's blue eyes blazed and his throat grew very red above the line of his military collar. By a tremendous effort of will he controlled his hands.

'You are mistaken, sir,' he said in a rather thick tone.

'In any case I am at your disposal,' returned de Maurienne with contempt. 'I shall be at home after five o'clock and shall not go out again. Good morning.'

'Good morning.'

Castiglione breathed more freely in the street. The whole affair was utterly incomprehensible to him, for he was not clever enough to guess that Teresa Crescenzi had long nourished the hope of making Monsieur de Maurienne fight a duel for her as the surest means of forcing him to marry her afterwards, and that Castiglione's unexpected appearance and the turn the interview

had taken had afforded her the very opportunity she desired. After he had left the room it had been the affair of an instant to tell de Maurienne that the officer had brutally insulted her by a coarse allusion to her intimacy with de Maurienne himself.

As Castiglione walked down the street, his eyes still on fire and his neck still very red, he asked himself how far he was bound to keep his word to Padre Bonaventura. After all, no one would ever connect a quarrel between him and de Maurienne in Teresa Crescenzi's drawing-room with Maria Montalto. Yet, in plain fact, the quarrel was the result of the very first step he had taken on Maria's behalf. He must either fight or leave the regiment, unless de Maurienne would retract his words.

The work of the last half-hour had not been very successful, but he had got a clue from Giuliana Parenzo which was better than nothing at all, for he had already made up his mind as to the course Schmidt must have taken when he found himself in difficulties.

He soon recovered his self-possession, and presently he strolled into the officers' club. It was almost deserted at that hour, for there was then no regular kitchen connected with it. He went straight to the writing-room, meaning to write a note to his colonel, for he knew that in such a case it would be best to lay the matter before him and a council of officers at once, and, in spite of his great anxiety for Maria, it was absolutely necessary to give precedence to the affair of honour. The reputation of the regiment was at stake.

A young subaltern of another regiment was sitting at

one of the tables with a sheet of paper before him, on which he had written a few words, but he had apparently not been able to get any further, and was glowering at the opposite wall, the picture of despair. He rose hastily on seeing a superior officer enter, and Castiglione nodded to him familiarly and sat down not far away. But he, too, had some difficulty in composing his note, and as he looked round in search of a word, he met the young lieutenant's eyes gazing at him with an imploring expression. The boy was the son of a former colonel of the Piedmont Lancers who had been promoted, but had lost most of his fortune nearly at the same time. The youth's allowance was small, therefore, and it was known that he played too high. Castiglione had a sudden inspiration.

'What is the matter?' he asked kindly. 'You seem to be in trouble. Can I help you?'

The young fellow flushed and sat up straight.

'Oh, no, Captain! Thank you very much indeed, but I should not dare ——'

'Have you lost money again?' asked Castiglione, in the same friendly tone.

'Only five hundred. But you know how it is — we young ones in the regiment never have any cash, you see ——'

'I will help you this time,' said the elder man. 'But only on one condition.'

The lieutenant was overwhelmed with gratitude.

'Oh, how kind you are!' he cried. 'Anything — I can repay the money next week ——'

'Nonsense. You will return it when you have it. The condition is that you take my advice.'

'And give up playing altogether! Yes, I know I should, but I cannot promise that.' His face fell again.

'No, don't promise me anything. Promise yourself, as a man, that you will never play for more than you have in your pocket. Here are the five hundred francs.'

He put the notes into an envelope, rose, and handed them to the delighted boy. Not knowing what might happen in the course of the day, he had taken all of his not very large store of cash with him.

'I shall ask you a little service in my turn,' he said, interrupting his young friend's voluble thanks. 'I do not go to gambling-houses myself, but for a strong reason I want the exact address of one which is said to exist in Via Belsiana. Do you happen to remember it?'

'The one that has a little door opening on the street, with a foreign doctor's door-plate over the bell? Is that the one?'

'Is there any other in the same street?'

'None that I know of. Of course, one goes there in civilian's clothes, and it is open after three in the afternoon, though there are never many people there till later. The password is made up of three numbers, twenty-six, eight, seventeen. Say that to the man at the door and he will let you in.'

Castiglione smiled.

'You seem to know all about it,' he said. 'That must be the one. If I were you I would not go to such places. Do you remember the number?'

The young lieutenant remembered it only too well, and gave it glibly.

'You will never tell anybody that I've been there, will you, Captain?' he added.

'Certainly not! It is no business of mine, but I advise you to give it up.'

Castiglione destroyed the note he had begun to write and went away, delighted with himself, and almost forgetting de Maurienne and Teresa Crescenzi. He looked at his watch. It was now one o'clock. The gambling den did not open till three, but he would have to go home to change his clothes. What he hoped for was that he might find the proprietor in the house before its clients were admitted. The interview might be a long one, but it was important that the right person should be altogether at Castiglione's disposal while it lasted, and that the place should be quiet. Between three and five there would be plenty of time to find his colonel and to procure two brother officers to see him through the affair.

He had never fought a duel, but was not much disturbed by the prospect of one, though an ordinary encounter with sabres is a much more serious matter in Italy than in France or Germany. He had never had a quarrel, because he was not the sort of man whom most people cared to meddle with, and also because the life he had led for so many years had never brought him into trouble. A man who does not excite the jealousy of other men, who pays his debts, helps his friends when he can and never asks for help, may easily spend his life in the Italian Army without ever being called out.

CHAPTER XX

An hour later Castiglione was admitted to the little house in Via Belsiana by a small man with eyes like a ferret and reddish hair, who shut the street door at once but did not seem inclined to let the visitor pass beyond the narrow hall without some further formality.

'The club is not open yet,' he said, civilly enough. 'You probably do not know the hours, as this is the first time you have been here, though you have the pass words.'

Castiglione understood that it was the doorkeeper's business to know the faces of those who frequented the place. He gave the man twenty francs by way of making acquaintance.

'Thank you,' said the fellow, who had not failed to notice that the pocket-book from which the notes were produced was well filled. 'I presume you wish to join the club, sir?'

He knew his business and was a judge of men at first sight; a glance had assured him that the newcomer was an officer in civilian's clothes, and was therefore perfectly eligible to the 'club.'

Castiglione only hesitated for a moment.

'Yes,' he answered. 'I should like to see the proprietor.'

'The treasurer, sir,' said the man, correcting him politely, but with some emphasis, 'is upstairs. If you will kindly step into the reading-room I will ask whether he can see you. I believe he has just finished his breakfast.'

Castiglione followed him through a long passage that turned to the left, and the man unlocked the door of a room that smelt of stale cigarette smoke. It was dark, but in a moment the doorkeeper turned up a number of electric lights. The walls were full of mirrors, and the furniture was of the description which must be supposed to suit the taste of the wicked, as it is only found in their favourite resorts. There was a vast amount of gilding, red plush and sky-blue satin, and the table was covered with dark green cotton velvet, fastened to the edges with gilt nails, below which hung a green and pink fringe.

As the place was a reading-room it was natural that there should be something in it to read. The literature was on the table, and consisted of a new railway guide, a small framed and glazed price-list of 'refreshments,' in which 'Cognac' was offered for the modest sum of twenty-five francs the bottle, and an old number of a disreputable illustrated paper.

Castiglione was not familiar with low places of any sort, and he looked about him with surprised disgust. He was not left to himself very long; the door opened and a broad-shouldered man with a white face entered and shut it behind him. He wore a dark morning coat, very well cut, and the fashionable collar and tie, but he smelt of patchouli and his light hair curled on his fore-

head. Castiglione felt an instant desire to throw him out, and would certainly have done so at sight if the man had appeared in his own rooms.

'Good morning. You wish to become a member of the club? Yes? A little formality is necessary. The committee, which I usually represent, decides upon the eligibility of candidates. There is no election, no subscription, and no entrance fee, so that it is a mere form.'

Castiglione watched the man attentively during this speech, which was delivered in a glib and oily manner, and he wondered to what nation the keeper of the gambling-hell belonged, for he had never seen a specimen of the breed before, though it flourishes from Port Said and Constantinople to San Francisco by way of Paris, London, and New York. Like the cholera, it appears to have its origin in the East. The specimens speak every language under the sun with equal fluency and correctness, but always with a slightly foreign accent, and they are neither Christians, Jews, nor Turks, but infidels of some other kind. He who has not had business with a Levantine blackleg or a Hindu money-lender does not guess what guile dwells in the human heart.

Castiglione looked at the 'treasurer' and sat down on a gilt chair. The man followed his example, and they faced each other with the table between them.

'Yes,' said the Captain, as if agreeing to the conditions of membership, which indeed seemed extremely easy to fulfil, 'I quite understand. But before joining your club I should like to ask for a little information. I am

told that the members sometimes play games of chance. Am I right?'

'Occasionally,' replied the treasurer, 'they do.'

'Just so. I am an officer, as you may have guessed. Now, in the other clubs to which I belong, you must be aware that we generally play with counters, and that we settle once a week. Is that the practice in your club, too?'

The treasurer smiled. Castiglione thought his face was like a mask of Mephistopheles modelled in whitish ice-cream.

'No. We play only for cash here.'

'A very good way, too,' said Castiglione in a tone of approval. 'But I will suppose a case. If, for instance, a member of the club loses all the cash he has brought with him, and if it is rather late in the evening, and he wishes to go on playing in the hope of winning back something, is there no way by which he can borrow a little money without going home to get it?'

'Oh, yes,' answered the treasurer, falling into the snare. 'When the committee is quite sure that a member is able to pay we are always glad to accommodate him with whatever he needs.'

'I see! That is just as convenient as our system of counters. The member merely signs a receipt for the money, I suppose, and settles at the end of the week.'

'Not exactly. The committee prefers a stamped draft at eight days, and charges a small interest. You see an accident might happen to the member ——'

'Quite so,' interrupted Castiglione, 'and the draft

protects the club, of course. There is only one more case about which I should like to ask. Suppose, for instance, that the member in question did not live in Rome, and that you did not know much about him. He might be a rich foreigner, who had joined for a few days, and though he might have come to the end of his cash, he might have something very valuable about him, such as a handsome diamond or ruby. Does the committee make an exception for him and accept anything of that sort as security?'

'Occasionally,' replied the treasurer, 'it does.'

'Yes,' said Castiglione in a thoughtful tone, leaning back in his chair with his hands thrust into the deep pockets of his overcoat. 'The committee lends money on valuables. That is very convenient.'

He glanced at the treasurer, who was smoking a huge Egyptian cigarette, which he held with his left hand, while the fingers of his right played a noiseless little tattoo on the green cotton velvet of the table; they were white and unhealthy-looking, and loaded with rings.

'The object of the committee,' said the man, 'is to meet the wishes of the members as far as possible, and to study their convenience.'

'As in the case of Orlando Schmidt,' observed Castiglione, keeping his eye on the treasurer's right hand.

The fingers at once stopped playing the noiseless tattoo and lay quite still, though the treasurer gave no other sign of intelligence; but that alone might mean a good deal.

'Who is Orlando Schmidt?' he asked, apparently unmoved.

'Surely you remember him,' answered Castiglione. 'You cannot have already forgotten Orlando Schmidt, and Carlo Pozzi of Palermo, and Paolo Pizzuti of Messina!'

The treasurer's face did not change, but his right hand moved and disappeared below the edge of the green velvet to get at his pistol. Castiglione was ready, and was too quick for him.

'Keep your hands on the table and don't call, or I'll fire,' he said sternly.

The treasurer looked down the barrel of a full-sized army revolver, and beyond it he saw Castiglione's eyes and resolute jaw. There is one point in which the breed to which he belonged does not resemble that of the European adventurer; it is a breed of cowards always ready with firearms but never able to face them. Moreover, Castiglione had the advantage.

'Don't shoot!' cried the man in manifest terror.

'Sign this or I shall,' answered Castiglione, not lowering his revolver. With the other hand he pushed across the table a sheet of paper on which he had previously written something; he then took a fountain pen from an inner pocket and laid it before the treasurer. 'Sign,' he said.

The treasurer offered no resistance, and his fingers shook visibly as he took up the pen and bent over the paper.

'Under protest,' he said feebly.

'If you write anything but your own name I will kill you. I'm watching the point of the pen. Never mind reading what is there. That is my affair. Your business is not to be shot. Don't sign an assumed name either, or I'll pull the trigger.'

In sheer terror of his life the man wrote his own name, or at all events the one he went by in his business. 'Rodolfo Blosse.'

'You have lost the money you lent to Orlando Schmidt,' said Castiglione, withdrawing the paper, and quietly waving it to and fro to dry the signature, 'but you have the advantage of being a live man.'

The revolver did not change its position.

'You seem to think there are no laws in your country,' said the treasurer, who was afraid to move.

'On the contrary we have excellent ones, many of which are made for people like you. Now I am going. I shall walk slowly backwards to the door, and if you move before you hear it shut after me you will never move again. Stay where you are, facing the table, and keep both hands on it.'

All doors in the resorts of the wicked have good locks, and Castiglione turned the key after him and went back to the street entrance, where the ferret-eyed porter was waiting.

'Always after three o'clock, is it not?' Castiglione asked carelessly.

The man nodded as he let him out.

'Yes, sir,' he answered respectfully, thinking of the twenty francs he had just received from the new member.

Castiglione walked briskly to the Piazza di Spagna, and then slackened his pace and drew a long breath before he lit a cigar, and repeated to himself the words that were written on the paper in his pocket. He walked slowly home, and when he was in his own room he spread the sheet out and wrote below Rodolfo Blosse's signature: '*Witness*, BALDASSARE DEL CASTIGLIONE, *Piedmont Lancers*.' Then he folded the sheet again, placed it in an envelope, which he sealed and addressed to the 'Reverend Father Bonaventura of the Capuchins.'

He got into his uniform again, and having placed the envelope in the inner pocket of his tunic, he went to see his colonel, to whom he had telephoned before going to Via Belsiana, asking to be received on urgent business at three in the afternoon. The great clock in the hall rang the Westminster chimes as he entered; it was a remembrance of the time when Casalmaggiore had been military attaché at the Italian Embassy in London.

He gave Castiglione an enormous Havana as they sat down by the fire, and he lit one himself and offered to have Turkish coffee made. Castiglione had forgotten to eat anything since he had come in from riding in the morning, and he accepted gladly.

'Is it about that mare?' asked the Duca when he had rung and given the order.

'No, not this time.' Castiglione laughed. 'I have come for advice in an affair of honour.'

'Oh!' The Colonel seemed annoyed. 'What a nuisance!' he observed with some emphasis. 'Wait till the man has brought the coffee. Meanwhile, about

that other matter — you have heard of my last offer?'

The Count of Montalto's Andalusian mare happened to be the only thing, animate or inanimate, which the Duca di Casalmaggiore wanted and could not get; for he did not even hanker after promotion. There was not an officer in his regiment, old or young, whom he had not employed in some piece of diplomacy in the hope of getting possession of the coveted animal, and he began talking about her at once, showing little inclination to listen to Castiglione's story, even when the servant had come and gone and they were drinking their coffee. He quite ignored the fact that Castiglione and Montalto were not on speaking terms, or he pretended to do so, for which the younger man was, on the whole, grateful to him.

'I am very sorry to change the subject,' said the Captain, at last, 'but this affair of mine is rather urgent.'

'I had quite forgotten it! Pray excuse me and tell me what the matter is.'

The Colonel settled himself with a bored expression and listened. He greatly disliked duelling in his regiment, and invariably hindered an encounter if he could. In his young days a great misfortune had happened to him; in a senseless quarrel he had severely wounded a brother officer, who had become consumptive in consequence and had died two years later.

He listened patiently to Castiglione's story, and then delivered himself of a general prediction.

'That infernal cousin of mine will be the death of one of us yet!' He sent an inch of heavy ash from his cigar

into the fire with a vicious flick. 'Why the devil did you go to see her?' he asked, very unreasonably.

Castiglione smiled but said nothing. He knew well enough that Teresa Crescenzi had tried to marry Casalmaggiore, and that the latter had been forced to make a regular defence.

'There's only one way to deal with such women,' he observed. 'Marry them and separate within six months. Then you need never see them again! What are you going to do?'

'That is precisely what I have come to ask you, as my chief. The honour of the regiment is the only question that matters to me. I shall do whatever you advise. De Maurienne expects to hear from me after five o'clock. As for the cause of the quarrel, Donna Teresa must be quite mad.'

'Mad?' Casalmaggiore laughed. 'You don't know her! Don't you see that it is all a trick to make de Maurienne compromise her by fighting a duel for her, and that he will be forced to marry her afterwards, for decency's sake?'

Castiglione looked at his colonel with sincere admiration, for such tortuous reasoning could never have taken shape in his own rather simple brain, though he now saw that no other explanation of Teresa's conduct was possible. The Duca smiled and pushed his delicate grey moustaches from his lips with the dry tip of his cigar, which he never by any chance placed between them. He seemed able to draw in the smoke by some mysterious means without even touching the tobacco, for

in smoking, as in everything else, he was a thorough epicure.

'I hope,' he said, his words following the fresh cloud he blew, 'that de Maurienne will at least have the sense to act as I suggested just now. In France he can do better. He can be divorced without difficulty. Fancy the satisfaction of divorcing Teresa! Can you see her expression? And she would be "a defenceless woman" again in no time. Of all the offensive forms of defencelessness!'

He laughed softly to himself.

'Meanwhile,' said Castiglione, trying to bring him back to the subject in hand, 'I am afraid something very disagreeable may happen.'

'What is that?' asked the Colonel, following his own amusing thoughts and still smiling.

'You see, I have never fought a duel, and as I am not inclined to let de Maurienne run me through, I might kill him. There would be very serious trouble if an Italian officer killed a French diplomatist, I suppose, not to mention the fact that I should have to spend a couple of years in a fortress.'

'You are afraid you might upset the European concert, are you?' The Colonel seemed much amused at the idea. 'But it is all nonsense, Castiglione. There is not going to be any fight.'

'But the man called me a coward to my face, Colonel! What am I to do?'

'Go home and go to bed. It's the only safe place when Teresa is on the war-path. If you want an excuse, I'll

put you under arrest in your rooms, but that seems useless. Go home and go to bed, I tell you!'

'It's rather early,' objected Castiglione, smiling. 'And meanwhile Monsieur de Maurienne will be sitting up waiting for my friends.'

'Dear Captain,' said Casalmaggiore, 'I have not the least idea what Monsieur de Maurienne will do. If I say that I will be responsible for your honour as for my own, and for that of the Piedmont Lancers, and if I tell you that there will be no duel, Monsieur de Maurienne may sit up all night, for weeks and weeks, so far as you are concerned.'

'That is a very different matter,' answered Castiglione gravely. 'I have nothing more to say. If my honour can be safer anywhere than in my own keeping, it will be so in your hands. Do you really wish me to stay at home this evening?'

'Yes, unless you want a couple of days' leave, though we have a general order from headquarters not to allow officers or men leave to go further than three hours by railway. Trouble is expected owing to these strikes, and we shall probably be doing patrol duty next week! You may have two days if you like.'

'Thank you, no. I'll go home.'

Castiglione made a movement to get up.

'No, no!' objected Casalmaggiore. 'I have not told you everything about that mare yet. Stay a little longer.'

'Certainly; with pleasure. But first, if it's not indiscreet, may I ask how in the world you are going to settle my affair?'

'You may ask, Castiglione,' replied the Colonel with great gravity, 'but it is beyond my power to answer you; for I give you my word of honour that I have not the slightest idea. Montalto knows perfectly well,' he continued without a break and in precisely the same tone of voice, 'that I will pay twenty thousand francs for the mare whenever he likes, and that's a large price in Italy.'

After that Castiglione made no further attempt to talk about de Maurienne, and his colonel kept him till after four o'clock.

CHAPTER XXI

Maria was silent and preoccupied throughout the day, and did not attempt to rouse Montalto from his apathy. He made no reference to the letters, though he gave some thought to the subject in the privacy of his study, and practically decided to consult the police on the morrow, since no other course suggested itself to his not very active imagination.

One of Giuliana Parenzo's horses was lame, and another had a bad cold, and she telephoned to ask if Maria would take her for a drive and make a few visits with her. Having no ready excuse, Maria agreed to the proposal on condition that Giuliana should not object to waiting for her a few minutes outside the Church of the Capuchins. She had ascertained from her maid, who was a Roman, that twenty-three-and-a-half o'clock meant sunset at all times of the year, which seemed to her a clumsy way of reckoning, the more so as she had to make further inquiries in order to ascertain the hour at which the sun actually went down. It turned out to be about a quarter before five, but as she was not quite sure, she thought it best to go at half-past four. If Padre Bonaventura had not come in she could wait for him. Giuliana probably had some visit to make at one of the modern hotels in the vicinity, for she and her husband necessarily knew many foreigners.

Accordingly, at half-past four, when the brown front of the old church was just beginning to glow in the evening light, the Countess's carriage stopped before the steps. Giuliana had said that she preferred to wait, as she had nothing to do in the neighbourhood, but, to Maria's surprise, she now also got out.

'It is a long time since I was here,' she explained, 'so I have changed my mind. I shall not be in your way if I stay near the door.'

'In the way? How absurd!' Maria laughed a little as she went up the steps.

They parted just inside the door; Giuliana knelt down by a straw chair on the right, while Maria went up the church diagonally towards the left, in the direction of the confessional which Padre Bonaventura usually occupied.

She found him in the last chapel on the left, by the door of the sacristy, in the act of shaking hands with Castiglione, who was evidently taking leave of him. Coming upon them so suddenly when the evening glow through the upper windows made the church very light, it was out of the question to draw back into the shadow. The monk saw her first, but Castiglione turned his head a second later, and the three were standing together.

Maria drew herself up very straight in the effort to check a cry of surprise, and Castiglione made rather a stiff military bow; but she saw his eyes in the rosy light, and he saw hers. A moment later he was gone, and her ears followed the musical little jingle of his spurs as he went down the nave towards the door, near which Giuliana Parenzo was kneeling.

But while she listened she was looking into the monk's face, and her own was pale and had a frightened expression.

'It could not be helped,' he said in a low voice. 'I did not know he was coming, and you are here early. If there is any fault it is mine.'

Maria listened in silence. He held out the sealed envelope Castiglione had brought him, and she saw the well-known writing.

'This is addressed to me,' continued Padre Bonaventura, 'but I give it to you unopened. It contains a document which will relieve you of all anxiety about your letters.'

'Already!'

'Yes. He has lost no time. He is a man of action.'

The monk could not withhold a word of admiration, and Maria felt the warmth in her cheeks.

'Indeed he is!' she answered in a low voice. 'Thank him for me!'

'I have thanked him. That is enough, and we may never meet again.'

'I may at least be grateful to you,' Maria said.

'My share has been small. I must leave you now, for there is some one waiting to confess.'

He left the chapel, but Maria remained a few moments longer. When she was sure that no one could see her she slipped the sealed envelope inside her frock, for she did not like to trust it to the little bag in which she carried her cards, her handkerchief, and her money. She had almost forgotten Giuliana till she met her standing by the

door, and saw the look of surprise and reproach in her eyes.

They went down the steps side by side in silence, and neither spoke till the carriage was moving again.

'I really think you might choose some other place in which to meet,' said Giuliana at last.

Maria had expected something of the sort from her impeccable friend.

'We met by accident, and we did not speak,' she answered quietly, for she knew that appearances were against her.

'I did not know that he ever entered a church,' returned Giuliana, who was well acquainted with Castiglione's opinions in matters of religion.

'Very rarely — at least, when I knew him.'

Maria was not inclined to say more, and Giuliana thought the explanation anything but sufficient. Maria had always been very truthful, but when unassailable virtue is suspicious it always goes to extremes, and tells us that the devil is everywhere, whereas, since he is usually described as an individual, and by no means as divine, it is hard to see how he can be in two places at once. Maria was aware of her friend's state of mind, but was too much occupied with her own thoughts to pay any more attention to it after having told the truth. The sealed envelope that came from Castiglione's hand lay inside her frock, upon her neck, somewhat to the left, and it was burning her and sending furious little thrills through her; yet it would have to lie there at least another hour while she made visits with Giuliana.

She left the latter at her home at last, and they had never parted so coldly in the course of their long friendship. When Maria was alone in her carriage, in the dark, she opened her frock again and took out the envelope and put it into her bag, for she could not bear to let it touch her any longer, and the recollection of Castiglione's eyes had not faded yet.

To drive the vision of him away she thought of Giuliana, and reflected upon the extreme foolishness of her friend's suspicions. If the two had meant to meet in the chapel, though only for an instant, it would have been easy to warn Castiglione that Giuliana was in the church, and that he must wait for her to go away before showing himself.

The carriage descended the Via Nazionale on the way home, and had gone a hundred yards further when it stopped short, to Maria's surprise, and at the same moment she saw a villainous face almost flattened against the glass. Telemaco turned the horses suddenly to the right and drove quickly along the Piazza dei Santi Apostoli, which was almost deserted. The Countess dropped the front window of the brougham and asked what was the matter.

'There is a riot in Piazza di Venezia, Excellency. They are throwing stones.'

Maria raised the glass again. It was only another strike, she thought, or an anarchist's funeral, and the carriage would go round by another way. Such disturbances were frequent that winter, but never seemed to have any serious consequences.

When she was at last alone in her boudoir she cut the envelope and spread out the sheet it contained. It was strange to be reading something written in Castiglione's handwriting, and to feel that it was her duty to read it.

This was what she read: —

'I, the undersigned, proprietor of a gambling-house in Via Belsiana, and representing Orlando Schmidt, the absconding steward of the Count of Montalto, and my accomplices calling themselves Carlo Pozzi of Palermo and Paolo Pizzuti of Messina, do hereby declare and confess that the photographs of seven letters, more or less, purporting to be written by Her Excellency the Countess of Montalto, by means of which I, and my aforesaid accomplices, have criminally attempted to extort money from her, are reproduced from forgeries executed by the aforesaid Orlando Schmidt, who had surreptitiously obtained specimens of Her Excellency's handwriting. Rome, this eleventh day of January 1906.

'Rodolfo Blosse.

'*Witness:* Baldassare del Castiglione,
'*Piedmont Lancers.*'

Castiglione had not hesitated to force the blackmailer to declare the letters to be forgeries. Maria guessed why he had done that, as she sat reading the paper a second time. He had suspected Schmidt of having really forged such words as she would never have written, she thought; and he had in some way extracted the truth from the man who signed the paper. In that case her danger had been even greater than she had imagined. What abomi-

nations might not have been forged in her handwriting! Yes, Castiglione was a man of action, indeed, as the monk had said. Poor Montalto had hesitated and done nothing for days, and in a little while some vile newspaper would have scattered broadcast a scandal from which no recovery would have been possible. But within twenty-four hours after she had spoken to Padre Bonaventura the man who loved her had found the chief criminal and had made him sign a document, on the strength of which no judge would hesitate to send the whole gang to penal servitude. 'Witness, Baldassare del Castiglione'; the well-loved name rang in her ears, the name of a man on whose honour there was no slur before the world, nor any in her inmost thoughts now; a name after which every officer and non-commissioned officer in the regiment would write his own blindfold, if need were, because they all knew him and trusted him.

She folded the paper slowly, letting her fingers linger where his had touched it last, and she put it back into the cut envelope and looked at the seal. It was the same he had used long ago, in the dark ages of her life — a plain, old-fashioned shield with his simple arms and the motto in Latin: *Si omnes ego non.*

Maria knew whence it was taken, with but a slight change. There was a mark in the margin of her old missal at the Gospel for Wednesday in Holy Week opposite the words, and the whole line read, 'Though all forsake Thee, I will not forsake Thee.' She had never had the courage to erase that mark, not even in the years

when she had deceived herself. Year after year, when the day came round, she had read the noble words; and many times she had read them bitterly, thinking of what followed afterwards and of him who, having spoken them, denied not once but thrice, and with an oath. She read them now on the dark wax, under the bright light, and after a little while she pressed the seal gently to her lips, the seal that held the motto she loved, not the paper he had touched.

'In all honour,' she said gravely, under her breath.

CHAPTER XXII

Soon after five o'clock the Duca di Casalmaggiore sent in his card to Monsieur de Maurienne. The diplomatist was engaged in examining an etching by Robetta with a huge lens, under a strong light, and was too much interested to desist until the Colonel was actually in the room. He received his visitor, whom he knew very well, with that formal courtesy which is considered becoming when an affair of honour is to be discussed. He had expected a couple of officers of Castiglione's rank, and had asked two of his own friends to hold themselves in readiness if he telephoned for them. He was surprised that only one representative should appear for his adversary, and that he should be no less a personage than the Colonel of the regiment.

Casalmaggiore did not even seem inclined to behave with the solemn gravity required on such an occasion. He sat down on a comfortable chair and laid his laced cap unceremoniously upon a little table he found at his elbow, instead of holding it in his hand and sitting bolt upright with his sabre between his knees. De Maurienne thought that Italians took duelling in much too free and easy a way, and he stiffened a little and sat very straight. He was not prepared for what was coming. Casalmaggiore spoke in French.

'I shall begin by making a little apology,' he said, leaning back and folding his gloved hands.

De Maurienne's eyebrows went up, high above the gold rims of his glasses, and he spoke in a politely icy tone.

'Indeed! I cannot see how any can be required from your side, under the circumstances!'

'Not from our friend Castiglione,' answered the Colonel, 'but on my own behalf. I must really beg your pardon beforehand for what I am going to say — always placing myself entirely at your disposal if I should unintentionally offend you. Is that quite clear?'

'Perfectly.'

'Thank you. You are the victim of an unworthy trick, my dear de Maurienne. I am going to take the liberty of explaining exactly what has happened to you, by giving you the details of what had just occurred when you entered Donna Teresa Crescenzi's drawing-room.'

De Maurienne looked at his visitor in surprise, and not without some suspicion.

'Donna Teresa is a connection of mine,' observed Casalmaggiore, 'and I know her extremely well. What I have to say about her should not offend you. Castiglione came to me this afternoon and told me the story. I know him to be a perfectly truthful and honourable man, and I know that he is incapable of fear. Indeed, he does not know what fear is.'

'Allow me to say,' said de Maurienne, 'that with us, in France, matters of this kind are discussed between the friends of the principals. Is the practice different in your country?'

'Not at all. But this is quite another sort of affair. I, personally, give you my word that what I am going to tell you is what really happened. You will understand that if I, as colonel, give my word for that of one of my officers, I am fully aware of the responsibility I undertake.'

'This changes the aspect of things, I admit,' said de Maurienne gravely, but less coldly.

He had never been placed in such a position, nor had he ever heard of just such a case.

'Practically,' continued the Colonel, 'it transfers all the responsibility to me. I know Castiglione to be a man of accurate memory, and as soon as he was gone I wrote down precisely what he had told me. Here it is.'

He took out his note-book, found the place, and read aloud a precise account of what had passed between Teresa Crescenzi and Castiglione up to the moment when de Maurienne had entered the room. De Maurienne listened attentively.

'My cousin — her father was my mother's cousin — is a very ingenious woman,' concluded Casalmaggiore with a smile, and pocketing his notes again. 'I am sorry to say that I have known her to exhibit her ingenuity in even more surprising ways than this.'

'She told me that Castiglione had accused her of meeting me in an equivocal place,' said de Maurienne.

'No doubt. We are rather afraid of her in Rome, and very much so in the family.'

'What is her object in all this?'

'I hope I do not offend you by saying that my good

cousin has determined to marry you,' answered Casalmaggiore, still smiling faintly. 'I should not expect you to share her enthusiasm on that point. It would not be precisely tactful of me to ask if I am right, but I shall be so free as to take it for granted. That being the case, you cannot fail to see that if she led you into a duel on her account, she would thereby be forcing you to compromise her to such an extent that many persons would think you ought to marry her as a matter of honour. If a man even distantly related to her, such as I myself, for instance, took up a quarrel for her, there would be at least the excuse of relationship, but there is not the shadow of a reason why you should do such a thing, even if there were any cause! That is all I have to say. I repeat that I am at your disposal, if I have said anything to offend you.'

Monsieur de Maurienne was perfectly brave, and though he was no duellist, and not even a good fencer, he would have faced the first swordsman in Europe without turning a hair; it is therefore no aspersion on his courage to say that he was afraid to marry Teresa Crescenzi, though he thought her very pretty and amusing, if a little vivid. The point explained by the Colonel had not escaped him either, and he had spent a very unpleasant afternoon.

He considered the matter for a few moments before he spoke.

'You have done me a great service,' he said. 'I have known Castiglione several months, and, without any disrespect to Donna Teresa, I must say that I was

not fully persuaded of the exactness of what she told me. I thought your cousin's manner a little strained — let us put it in that way.'

'It is impossible to speak of a lady with greater consideration,' said Casalmaggiore.

'But I was placed in a difficult position, and very suddenly. Such things happen now and then. Perhaps, in the same situation, you yourself, or Castiglione, would have acted as hastily as I did.'

'Quite so. Even more hastily, perhaps.'

The Colonel was thinking that under the circumstances he would have told Donna Teresa exactly what he thought of her, taking advantage of relationship to be extremely plain.

'Castiglione,' continued de Maurienne, 'behaved in the most honourable and forbearing way. I take great pleasure in saying that I sincerely regret the offensive expressions I used, and that I entertain the highest respect for him. Will you permit me? I will write him a short note, by your kindness.'

'Thank you. It will be much appreciated.'

A quarter of an hour later Castiglione's orderly received another shock to his nerves. When he answered the bell and saw his colonel on the landing, resplendent in a perfectly new uniform, the trooper flattened himself at attention against the open door with such precision and violence that the back of his head struck the panel with a crack like a pistol shot, his eyes almost started out of his head, and he was completely speechless.

The Captain was in his sitting-room, poring over a new German book on the functions of cavalry in war, and a well-worn dictionary lay at his elbow. He started to his feet in surprise.

'I think you will find this satisfactory,' said Casalmaggiore, handing him de Maurienne's note and sitting down.

Castiglione read the contents quickly, still standing.

'What in the world did you tell him?' he asked in amazement.

'The truth,' answered the Colonel, suppressing a slight yawn, for the whole affair had bored him excessively. 'It is amazing what miracles the truth will perform where everything else fails! If Teresa could only realise that, she would simplify her existence. As you have not gone to bed, in spite of my advice, come and dine with me. I've got another idea about that mare, and I should like to talk it over with you. I think it will succeed.'

Castiglione laughed a little.

'I will come with pleasure,' he said. 'What is the new idea? I thought you developed the subject pretty fully this afternoon.'

'This has occurred to me since,' answered Casalmaggiore gravely. He was silent for a moment, pursuing his favourite scheme. 'Castiglione,' he said, rising suddenly and looking at his watch, 'if you ever let Teresa guess that I have interfered with her plans, I'll court-martial you!'

'Never fear!' The Captain laughed again.

'As for leave, I'm glad you would not take your two days. There is a general strike again, and we shall certainly have some patrol work to do, if nothing worse. After you had left me I got another message from headquarters.'

CHAPTER XXIII

Two days later Montalto informed Maria after luncheon that he had an appointment with the Chief of Police at three o'clock, and had decided to lay the whole matter before him and to leave it altogether in his hands. It had taken Montalto almost a week to reach this final decision, and Maria had devoutly hoped that he would never act at all. She thought it would be like him to put off doing anything till he convinced himself that the blackmailer's letter had been an idle threat, never to be put into execution; but she was mistaken in this, for Montalto never left quite undone what he believed that it was his duty to do, and in the present case, though he had been so slow, he was really in much greater apprehension of a scandal than Maria understood.

The people who are the hardest to live with are often those who speak the truth, and nothing but the truth, but not the whole truth. It is never possible to be sure what they are hiding from us out of prudence or shyness, prudishness or delicacy; it is the most difficult thing in the world to find out precisely what they know and what they do not know, without putting direct questions which would be little short of insulting.

Montalto was such a man. His power of keeping his own counsel without telling an untruth was amazing; and

his own counsel was not always wise. It was this characteristic of his which had twice suggested to Maria, in moments of despair, that he had come back to revenge himself upon her by systematically torturing her to death. Mediocrity is never so exasperating as when it affects to be inscrutable.

'I have not thought it best to talk much with you about the letters, my dear,' Montalto said. 'In such cases it is the man's business to act.'

Maria smiled faintly. She foresaw much useless trouble if he carried out the intention he had been so long in formulating, though she knew nothing of the ways of the police. For two whole days she had lived in the certainty that she was safe, and the thought that the whole story was to be told again, to a stranger and by her husband, was very disturbing. On the other hand it seemed all but impossible to show Montalto the blackmailer's confession, written in Castiglione's handwriting, and signed by him as a witness.

'Perhaps,' she suggested, 'since it is already so near the eighth day, we had better wait until they write a second time, as the letter said they would.'

Montalto looked at her in surprise, and paused in the act of reconstructing one of his Havana cigarettes.

'Why, my dear?' he asked. 'You yourself urged me to act, before I had time to form an opinion, and you seemed distressed because I took a day or two to think it over; and now you suddenly advise me not to act at all. This is very strange. I do not understand you.'

He waited for her to answer him, and he saw that she hesitated.

'You must have some very good reason for changing your mind so unexpectedly,' he said, in a discontented tone, and resumed the rolling of his cigarette.

Maria felt the difficulty of the situation, for which she was not in the least prepared; she had been very sure that he would not do anything in the matter, because she hoped that he would not.

'Also,' he continued, 'why do you speak of more than one person?'

'More than one?'

'You said: until "they" write a second time. What reason have you to suppose that any one is concerned in this but Schmidt?'

She had been thinking of the wording of the paper, of Blosse and his 'accomplices.'

'The letter mentioned two other names,' she said.

'I have no doubt that Schmidt goes by twenty,' returned her husband testily. 'You know very well that Pozzi and Pizzuti both stand for Schmidt!'

He lighted his cigarette, and smoked in silence for some moments.

'I cannot understand why you have changed your mind,' he repeated at last. 'You must have some reason.'

Maria attempted a little diplomacy.

'Don't you think a second letter, if it should come, might give a better clue for the police to work on, or might — what do they call it? — strengthen the evidence against Schmidt?'

'There is evidence enough already to send him to penal servitude, if we can catch him,' answered Montalto. 'I really cannot see what more is needed!'

'Except that — to catch him,' suggested Maria. 'I really think that another letter ——'

'Absurd!' Montalto was seriously annoyed with her by this time. 'Something has happened to make you change your mind. Am I right or not?'

Maria turned a little pale and bit her lip. But she would not tell an untruth.

'Yes, something has happened,' she answered.

'What?' The single word was pronounced with a good deal of sharpness.

Maria turned to him.

'I would rather not tell you,' she said gently. 'It is quite useless for you to go to the police, for the letters will not be published.'

She spoke in a tone of perfect certainty that surprised him.

'You seem very sure,' he said.

'I am quite sure.'

'And you object to telling me why you are. Very strange!'

'I don't "object," Diego. I only say I would rather not. I ask you not to question me.'

'My dear,' answered Montalto, 'only reflect upon what you are saying. In the first place, you are a woman, and you may be mistaken.'

'I am not. I assure you I am not.'

If she had been less anxious to pacify him she would have asked if men never made mistakes.

'I confess I should like to judge of that, considering that the honour of my name is at stake,' said her husband.

'Your name is safe, and mine too. Please, please don't ask me to tell you!'

'Maria, there is some mystery about all this, and I cannot consent to let it go on. It must be cleared up. It is my duty to ask what you have done to stop the publication of those letters.'

She made a last appeal.

'You have forgiven me so much, Diego. You have trusted me so much! I only ask you to trust me now — there is nothing to forgive!'

'You may as well say at once that you have sent a cheque to that scoundrel,' said Montalto angrily. 'You have thrown it away. He still has the photographs, and as soon as he wants more money he will threaten us again. I warned you not to do that!'

Maria hoped desperately that if she remained silent he would continue in this belief. But the obstinacy of an over-conscientious person who has a 'duty' to perform is appalling.

'Have you sent the money?' he asked severely, as soon as he was sure that she did not mean to say anything in reply.

'No.'

'Then you are ashamed of what you have done. There is no other explanation of your silence, my dear. You yourself must see that.'

He said 'my dear' in a tone that exasperated her.

'No,' she cried vehemently, 'I have done nothing to be ashamed of! You must find some other explanation of my silence, if you insist on having one!'

'Your conduct is so extraordinary,' Montalto replied, in an offended tone, 'that I can only account for it in one way. Instead of trusting to me, you have allowed some one else to help you, and you are ashamed to tell me who the person is.'

'I am not ashamed!' Maria drew herself up now, and her dark eyes gleamed a little. 'But I will not tell you!'

'There is only one name you would be ashamed to let me hear in this matter. If you persist in your silence I shall know that you have been helped by Castiglione.'

Montalto's eyes were a little bloodshot, and fixed themselves on hers. She did not hesitate any longer.

'I never lied to you, and I am not ashamed of the truth,' she answered proudly. 'Baldassare del Castiglione has helped me.'

Until she had actually told him so, in plain words, Montalto had wished not to believe what he had guessed. His face had been changing slowly, and now she saw once more, after many years, the look it had worn when he had first accused her, and she had bowed her head. When he spoke again she remembered the tone she had not heard since then.

'As you are not ashamed to say so, I suppose you will not mind telling me what he did.'

'You shall see for yourself.'

She left the drawing-room, and he sat quite still dur-

ing the few seconds that elapsed; quite still, staring at the seat that she had left. For he loved her. When she came back she stood before him. He took the paper from her hand and read it with difficulty, though he had known the handwriting well enough in old times. He read it all, to the name of the regiment after Castiglione's signature. Then he handed back the paper.

'I have been mad,' he said slowly and almost mechanically.

She misunderstood him.

'You see that I was right,' she said. 'Your honour is safe.'

His face changed in a way that frightened her. She thought he was choking. An instant later he sprang to his feet and left her side, pressing both his hands to his ears like a man raving. His voice rang out with a mad laugh.

'My honour!'

Maria laid one hand on the back of the chair he had left, to steady herself, for the shock of understanding him was more than she could bear. Scarcely knowing that her lips moved she called him back.

'Diego! Diego! Hear me!'

'Hear you? Have I not heard?' He turned upon her like a madman. 'Have I not heard and remembered every word you have spoken, those eight months and more? How you would tear the memory of that man from your heart? How you called God to witness that you would forget him? How you and he took an oath never to meet again? Have I not heard you, and for-

given, and believed, and trusted, and loved you like the miserable fool I am? And you ask me to hear you again? Oh, never, never! You have promised and you have lied to me, you have called God to witness and you have blasphemed, you have asked for trust and you have betrayed me with that man — and now you tell me he has saved my honour. My honour! My honour!'

Maria closed her eyes and grasped the chair. But she would not bend her head to the storm as she had bowed it long ago.

'I am innocent. I have done none of these things.'

She could find no other words, and he would not have listened to more, for he was beside himself and began to rave again, while she stood straight and white beside the chair. Sometimes his voice was thick, as his fury choked him, sometimes it was shrill and wild, when his rage found vent. But each time, as he paused, exhausted, to draw breath, her words came to him calm and clear in the moment's stillness.

'I am innocent.'

His madness subsided by slow degrees, and then changed all at once, and he was again in the mood she remembered so well. He came and stood still two paces from her, his eyes all bloodshot but his face white.

'How dare you say you are innocent?' he asked.

She held out the envelope in which Castiglione's writing had come to her.

'It is addressed to my confessor, who gave it to me,' she said.

He came nearer and steadied his eyes to read the name, for his sight was not very good.

'Do you think such a trick as that can deceive me?' he asked with cold scorn.

'Send for him,' said Maria. 'Your carriage is at the door, for you were going out. Go and bring him here, for he will come.'

Montalto looked at her with a strange expression.

'Go to the Capuchins,' she said calmly. 'Ask for Padre Bonaventura, and bring him back in the carriage. He will not refuse you.'

'Padre Bonaventura? Old Padre Bonaventura?' He repeated the name in a dazed tone, for he knew it well, as many Romans did.

'Bring him here,' Maria said. 'He will tell you that it was he who went to Baldassare del Castiglione and asked his help and received this paper from him on the evening of the same day. He will tell you, too, that at the very moment when it was placed in his hands I came for the answer, and we met, face to face, and looked at each other; but we did not speak, and Castiglione went away at once. Giuliana Parenzo was with me, and was waiting for me inside the door; she saw him go out a moment after we had come. Will you believe her? If you still think I am not telling the truth, will you believe my confessor?'

While she was speaking she looked at him with calm and clear eyes in the serenity of perfect innocence. And all at once he broke down and cried aloud with a wail of agony.

'Maria! What have I done?'

Then he was at her feet, his arms round her body, his face buried against her, sobbing like a woman, as she had never sobbed, rocking himself to and fro like a child, as he had rocked himself when he had first come back to her, kissing her skirt frantically. And his unmanly tears ran down upon the grey cloth.

She felt a little sick as she bent and tried to soothe him, forcing herself to lay kind hands upon his head, and then gently endeavouring to lift him to his feet, while he clasped her and implored her forgiveness in broken words. But she was very brave. He must not guess what she felt, nor feel that the hand that smoothed his hair grew cold from sheer loathing of what it touched.

There are women living who know what that is, and are brave for honour's sake; but none are braver than Maria was on that day. She would not leave him for a moment, after that, until it was past seven o'clock. Little by little, as she talked and soothed him, she brought him back to himself, with the patience that angels have, and never need where all is peace.

She had a respite then, and Giuliana Parenzo and Monsignor Saracinesca came to dinner, which made it easier. Afterwards, too, Montalto and his friend talked as usual and argued about Church and State, and no one would have suspected that the grave and courteous host, with his old-time formalities of manner and his rather solemn face, had raved and wept and dragged himself at his wife's feet that very afternoon.

The Marchesa was still inclined to show Maria a little

cool disapproval when she came. The younger woman felt it in the almost indifferent touch of her hand, and in the distinctly airy kiss that did not come near the cheek it was meant for. The two had not seen each other since they had gone to the Capuchin church together; but Giuliana, who was just and sensible, had made several reflections in the meantime, and had come to the conclusion that, after all, Maria and Castiglione might have met by chance, though why in the world a man who believed in nothing should happen to be in a church, and in that particular one precisely at that hour, was more than she could explain. It was very odd, but perhaps Baldassare was converted; and the good Marchesa said a little prayer, quite in earnest, asking that he might be. Possibly, she thought immediately afterwards, Maria had converted him, and she hoped this might be the case, as it would explain so many things. Giuliana herself had once attempted to influence him, out of sheer goodness of heart, long ago, and had talked religion to him in a corner after a dinner party for a whole evening, a proceeding which might have started a little gossip about any other woman. She had tried to expound the Nicene Creed to him, article by article, but just as she reached the 'Life of the World to come' he fell sound asleep before her eyes, after one of the most puzzling and painful experiences in his recollection, for he had been in the saddle all day at a review, and the room was so warm that it made him understand the Descent into Hell in the only sense the words had ever conveyed to him.

Confidence was presently restored between the friends and Giuliana began to talk about the news of the hour; about strikes, as regarded from the ministerial point of view; about the probability that the Ministry would fall before Lent, merely on general principles, because that seems to be the critical time of year in politics, as it is for gouty patients; and, lastly, about Teresa Crescenzi.

'I am not given to prying into other people's affairs,' Giuliana said, 'but I should really like to know the truth about her and de Maurienne.'

'I fancy she will marry him in the end,' observed Maria, rather indifferently, for she was still thinking of the strikes and the disturbances in the streets, and wondering whether there was any risk in sending Leone all the way to school at the Istituto Massimo every morning, though his tutor took him there and brought him home.

'De Maurienne has left Rome very suddenly,' said Giuliana, 'and I am inclined to think that Teresa is to be an "unprotected widow" a little longer.'

'She must be growing used to it!' Maria laughed a little.

'The French Ambassador told Sigismondo that de Maurienne had asked for leave very suddenly, and that, as he seems to think that diplomacy consists in the study of etchings, no objection had been made. Teresa is evidently furious. She says he told her that he was going to Paris in order to be present at an art sale, but that she believes he has run away from a duel. Have you not heard that?'

Giuliana looked at Maria quietly, but saw no change in the warm pallor of her friend's face, nor the least quivering of the eyelids.

'No,' Maria answered, unsuspectingly. 'I have heard nothing. Does Teresa say who it was that wanted to fight with him?'

'Yes, but I don't believe a word of it. She says it was Balduccio.'

'Why in the world should he quarrel with Monsieur de Maurienne?' Maria turned innocent eyes to meet Giuliana's.

'Teresa does not explain that,' laughed the Marchesa, 'but she darkly hints that the affair which did not come off concerned herself!'

'How silly she is!'

Indeed, the absurdity of the story was so apparent, that Maria would not ask any more questions. She was continually doing her best to keep Castiglione out of her thoughts, and the painful scene with her husband during the afternoon made it all the harder for her. She changed the subject.

'Giuliana,' she asked, 'shall you let your boys walk to school or even go in the tram while the strike lasts?'

'Oh, yes!' answered the Marchesa. 'But the trams have stopped this afternoon. Have you not been out? The boys walk in the morning, for there is never any disturbance till much later. All good anarchists dine comfortably, and often too well, before they go out to howl in the streets.'

She laughed carelessly.

'I daresay you are right,' Maria answered. 'I never let Leone be out in the city on foot or in trams after luncheon. Three or four times a week he rides with Diego in the Campagna, and they generally go as far as one of the city gates in a cab, but I always send Diego's little brougham to fetch them. I'm afraid they may both catch cold in a cab after riding.'

'Your husband is very fond of it, is he not?'

'Yes, and he rides well, and looks well on a horse — particularly on that lovely little Andalusian mare he brought from Spain.'

'The one the Duca di Casalmaggiore is so anxious to buy?' inquired Giuliana.

'The Colonel of the Piedmont Lancers?' Maria wondered whether her friend was trying to lead the conversation back to Castiglione again. 'I did not know he wanted her.'

'My dear! He thinks of nothing else! He would like to make it an affair of State. The other day he came to see Sigismondo and talked about the mare for three-quarters of an hour, trying to induce him to use his influence with me, to use my influence with you, to use your influence with your husband, to induce him to sell the Andalusian for twenty thousand francs! I think he must be quite mad! It is an enormous price for a saddle-horse, and he has offered it through half a dozen people. I wonder that Diego should not have spoken of it to you.'

'He never tells me anything,' Maria replied. 'But I can guess what he must have answered. He probably

said that the Count of Montalto buys horses but does not sell them!'

Giuliana laughed.

'I did not know you could be so malicious, Maria! That is precisely what he did say.'

'I did not mean to say anything disagreeable, I'm sure,' returned Maria. 'That is Diego's way; he is old-fashioned. The idea that a Count of the Holy Roman Empire could possibly sell anything never occurred to him.'

'My father is just like him in that,' observed Giuliana.

'So was mine! It is the reason why he left me only just enough to live comfortably, instead of several millions. If I had not been his only child we should have starved!'

'We were ten, and nine of us are alive.' Giuliana laughed. 'When my father and mother were sixty — you know they are just the same age — there were thirty-two at table, between us and our children!'

'Look at the Saracinesca family,' said Maria. 'Old Prince Giovanni was an only son, I believe, and now they are like the sands by the sea! As far as numbers go, there is no fear of the old Roman families dying out!'

'Your husband was an only son, was he not?' Giuliana asked.

'Yes.'

'And you have only ——' The Marchesa checked herself — 'yes,' she concluded with that extreme vagueness that comes over us all when we have half said something quite tactless.

But Maria chose to complete the thought.

'Yes,' she said quietly, but not at all vaguely. 'Do you wonder that I am anxious about letting my only child go about on foot when there are strikes?'

'No, dear, I don't wonder at all, though I do not think there is any real danger.'

'I suppose presentiments are very foolish,' Maria observed thoughtfully. 'Do they ever trouble you, Giuliana?'

'Not often. But I remember once being oppressed with the certainty that Sigismondo was going to die in the course of the winter. It haunted me day and night for weeks and weeks. I used to dream that he was lying dead on the dining-room table. It was always the dining-room table, and at last I got nervous about sitting down at it.'

'Well? Did anything happen?' Maria seemed interested.

'Oh, yes! The children had the mumps.' She spoke thoughtfully.

Very sensible people who are by no means stupid sometimes say things that would disgrace an idiot child. But Maria did not laugh.

'The other night, after I had left you,' she said, 'there was some sort of demonstration in the Piazza di Venezia, and the carriage stopped a moment before turning another way. A man looked through the window, trying to see me in the dark. I could see him plainly under the electric light. It was a horrible face, flattened against the pane, and though I did not pay much attention to it

at the time, it comes back to me and frightens me when I know that Leone is out in the streets with his tutor. Perhaps he is only going to have the mumps!'

She tried to laugh now.

'A tutor is generally supposed to be a sufficient protection for a boy,' observed Giuliana, not much impressed. 'Yours is a good-sized man too, and Sigismondo always says that keeping order in a city depends on the delusion that big men are more dangerous than short men. At all events most people think they are, and your tutor looks like an ex-carabineer.'

'I'm sure he is a coward,' said Maria nervously. 'He would think only of saving himself if there were any danger! I'm sure of it.'

'It's all imagination, my dear,' said the practical Marchesa. 'Your love for the boy makes you fancy that all sorts of impossible things are going to happen to him.'

'Giuliana — perhaps I'm very foolish to be made wretched by a presentiment, but if any harm came to Leone ——'

She stopped short. The conventional phrase 'I should die' was on her lips, but before it was spoken she realised that it meant nothing to her, and checked herself.

'Of course, of course!' answered Giuliana in a motherly tone. 'I quite understand that. I'm fond of my children, too; I know just what you feel.'

'It's not the same for you, Giuliana,' said Maria in a low tone. 'I've only Leone, you know.'

'Leone and your husband,' corrected Unassailable Virtue.

'Yes, Leone and my husband.'

Maria did not resent the correction. Even Giuliana did not suspect that she was desperately unhappy in more ways than one, and it was better so; but she silently thought of what her life would be if Leone were taken and her husband were left.

CHAPTER XXIV

The strike was an obstinate one, and lasted longer than had been expected. This story is not concerned with the theories or the practices of the so-called Chamber of Labour in Italy. It is enough to say that the organisation has neither the importance nor the intelligence of similar bodies in other great countries, and that instead of tending to the scientific socialism of Bebel, its leaders, or its tyrants, are distinctly of the anarchist class, and all they know about the French Revolution is that it had a Reign of Terror which they hanker to restore. There are true socialists in Italy, as there are many true republicans, but they must not be classed with the raving rowdies who force honest workmen to leave their work and who howl and thr w stones in the streets. Beyond this, nothing need be said about the general strike during which the Countess of Montalto was haunted by a tormenting presentiment that something dreadful was going to happen to her son.

The facts, so far as they affected her, were simple enough. During some days the instigators of disturbance appeared at more or less regular hours, chiefly in the neighbourhood of the Piazza di Venezia, where they made wild and foolish speeches that stirred up a row which occasionally led to the throwing of a few stones.

The city police and the foot carabineers then appeared to disperse the crowd, and generally succeeded in doing so without trouble when it was ready for its supper, or tired of its amusement, or had any sufficient reason for going home. There was not much more spirit in the whole thing than there used to be in the last days of town-and-gown rows in Oxford and Cambridge. But such as the disturbances were, they had become a great nuisance, and the strike itself was extremely irritating to all the better classes, to whom it was a source of great inconvenience.

The city authorities asked Headquarters for troops, Headquarters asked the War Office, the War Office asked the Ministry, and the Ministry, being rather shaky just then, did nothing in particular. Nevertheless, the orders usual at such times were quietly issued, the troops in garrison were in readiness if needed, and no more leave was granted to officers or men.

Meanwhile the Romans grew tired of the whole senseless affair, by which everybody was losing money and nobody was gaining anything, and the more respectable citizens felt that it was time that law and order should be restored. The simplest plan, since no troops were forthcoming, seemed to be to help the police in arresting rioters who objected to being handcuffed; for the policemen did their best, and on the whole did well, with a good deal of forbearance, but the result was not always satisfactory, and many of the force were more or less badly hurt; very few were hit by bullets, for a revolver is one of the safest playthings in the world except when every-

body is quite sure that it is not loaded, and then it usually kills some one on the spot; but a good many men were badly wounded by stones, some were severely beaten, and several were stabbed.

On the day when Giuliana dined with her friend it had happened that two policemen were trying to secure a big rioter who defended himself vigorously with a stout blackthorn stick, and they were getting the worst of it. The hour was just after twelve o'clock, when a number of Government clerks had left a neighbouring public office together, to get their mid-day meal at an eating-house; and they stopped in a body and watched the fight.

One of the policemen received a blow that almost broke his arm, but the other almost immediately caught the striker's heavy stick and tried to wrench it away; and still the knot of Government clerks watched the struggle. In sheer exasperation the man who had been hurt spoke to the bystanders.

'You might help us, instead of standing there looking on!' he cried.

The little body of respectable men, who had supposed that they had no right to interfere, did not need any further invitation. They sprang forward, threw the man down, and proceeded to administer a sound thrashing with their sticks, after which they held him while the astonished and delighted policeman slipped on the handcuffs. Not feeling that their duty ended there, the clerks followed quietly in a body till they saw the prisoner passed into the nearest police station; after which they went to lunch.

The matter did not end there. The news of what they had done spread from mouth to mouth in a few hours, and their example was followed by other citizens. The policemen went about in pairs, and before night each couple of them was under the protection of a dozen or fifteen sober, respectable citizens, who walked behind at some distance, chatting and smoking, but armed with serviceable sticks. The police scored no more failures in effecting arrests during the afternoon, and there was no crowd in the Piazza di Venezia at sunset.

But the matter did not end there either. If the citizens protected the police, the Chamber of Labour, as it calls itself, would protect the rowdies. They needed it too, for on the next morning the citizens went about in considerable force, and when they came upon a suspicious-looking individual they asked him civilly if he were a striker. If he answered in the affirmative they gave him a good drubbing and left him to his meditations. In most cases the man denied the imputation indignantly and made off at a round pace. The decent working men stayed at home, as they had done from the beginning, and mourned the hour when they had joined the Chamber of Labour.

The rowdies showed fight, in accordance with the resolutions passed on the previous evening, and began to parade the streets in bands, many of them carrying revolvers in their pockets, and a good many armed with the much more dangerous knife, which Alphonse Karr used to call the 'weapon of precision.' The citizens had only their sticks, but they made good use of them. They

meant to represent law and order, and knives and pistols are forbidden weapons. Excepting the places where the two parties were actually in collision, the city was silent. The shops opening directly on the pavement were shut; the cabmen, who belonged to the Chamber of Labour, were also on strike, but most of them, as it afterwards turned out, were having a quiet holiday in the country. The trams were not running, for drivers and conductors belonged to the organisation, and the Municipality or the Government was afraid to man the cars with soldiers. A few private carriages were to be seen, but the ooccupants as well as the coachmen were in considerable danger.

Nevertheless, a good many people walked about as if nothing were happening. It was not a revolution; the Government offices and schools were open, the strikers had no reason for interfering with the postal telegraph offices, and the railway-men could no longer strike because a recent law had decreed that they were not working men but Government servants. The trains therefore ran regularly; almost all the banks were open and were protected by policemen in plain clothes; the Pincio and the Villa Borghese were almost as full of nurses and children as usual on a fine winter's day, and officers and civilians exercised their horses on the small course and in the meadow within the ring. Altogether, the state of things would have looked rather contradictory anywhere but in Rome, where it seems as if nothing can ever happen in the ordinary way. If any truthful and industrious person like Villani, or Sanudo of Venice, is quietly keep-

ing a chronicle of daily events in Rome at the present day, and if his manuscript comes to light fifty years hence, he will not be believed. It is true that all industrious persons are not truthful, but since Aristotle admits that even a woman or a slave may possibly be good, some good-natured people will perhaps allow that a novelist may sometimes write the truth.

Maria had passed a wretched night. After the two guests had gone Montalto had come to her room and had poured out all his remorse for his mad conduct, entreating her over and over again to forgive him, not breaking down in tears, but overwhelming her with every assurance and proof of his almost insane love. It was late when he left her at last, but she could not sleep then. Every nerve in her body was quivering from the effort of self-control, her teeth were on edge, and when she closed her weary eyes she saw wheels of fire. She had gone to the chapel in her nightdress to say her prayers, heedless of the cold air and the icy marble pavement, and she had knelt there more than half an hour, trying to recover herself; not that she could think much of the words her lips silently formed, but because the solemn stillness helped her, and the restful certainty that nothing of what she had left behind could touch her there.

She went back to her room, and after three o'clock she fell asleep from utter exhaustion, because she was really a very sound and normal woman, and the human machine had run down, like a clock. Men have slept in battle.

Yet her natural elasticity was so great that in the

morning, when she glanced at her face in the looking-glass, she saw that it hardly looked tired. There was only a slightly deeper shadow under her eyes to show that she had not slept enough, and that would soon go away, and she would be quite herself again.

She had not dreamt that anything had happened to Leone, for she had been too worn out to dream at all, and she was a little ashamed of her presentiments and fears. The weather never affected her very much, but the sun was streaming into her room with the crisp morning air, and she had opened both windows wide to let out the stale odour of a cigarette her husband had smoked before he left her. The smell of his Havana cigarettes had always been intensely disagreeable to her, though she would not let him guess it, and this morning it seemed positively nauseous. There was the nasty little end of one of them, with some ashes, in a little silver dish which she emptied into the fireplace; then she blew into it, and poured some lavender water into it, and dried it out with a handkerchief before she rang for her maid.

That was instinctive. She always did it when he had smoked in her room at night, and she was unconscious that it meant anything more than she had intended it to mean when she had done it for the first time, many months ago, on the morning after his return to Rome. But somehow the process had become symbolical, though she did not know that it had; it signified getting rid of the recollection of his presence.

She asked her maid if Leone had gone to school yet,

and was told that he and his tutor had left the house at the usual hour. The maid had heard the tutor ask a footman whether the Count was awake, and on learning that he had not rung for his valet, the tutor inquired whether any orders had been left about taking Leone to school. The Count had left none, the footman said, and went on with his work.

Maria asked if the maid had heard any noises in the street or the square, or anything like rioting. The maid smiled. At that hour in the morning! How could her mistress think of such a thing?

As if, because Rome is an old-fashioned city, street-fights could only take place decently, and at regular hours! But Maria felt reassured by the woman's tone, and remembered how confidently her friend had spoken in the evening. One of her reasons for liking Giuliana so much was that she was so solidly sensible, and so sensibly good. Teresa Crescenzi had once said before a gay party in the old days that it was of no use to have Giuliana's face and figure if you were going to be a monster of virtue, and when Maria had made a half-laughing retort Teresa had said that Maria did not look upon Giuliana as a necessity, nor as a luxury, but as a comfort; which was to some extent true; and Teresa had gone on to say it was a pure waste of good material that anybody who was so impeccably virtuous as the Marchesa should know how to dress so well; and every one had laughed.

Maria had her tiny breakfast in her boudoir, tea and a slice of toast with an infinitesimal layer of butter, after

the way of most southern people, and she felt better able to face the day than had seemed possible when she had fallen asleep after three o'clock. She had brought with her from Via San Martino the little service she had used during so many years, and the sight of it in the morning always revived the momentary illusion of freedom. Memory loves to play with toys — perhaps because it knows how to use the knife so well.

The small meal occupied her longer than usual; she filled her cup a second time and took another little bit of toast. The hour had come when she usually went to say good morning to her husband in his study, but she had risen late, according to her own ideas, and the time had come too soon. But if she did not go to him, he would presently come to her to ask in a petulantly affectionate way whether she had forgotten him. To-day he would perhaps think that she had not quite forgiven him for yesterday's scene, and there would be another. The thought chilled her, and she touched the button of the bell — a pretty button Giuliana had given her, made of a cat's-eye set in a small block of Chinese jade that lay on the corner of the table. The maid came to take away the things.

'Is the Count in his study?' inquired Maria. 'Please ask.'

But the maid knew that he had not rung for his man, and was probably still asleep; for a person who had applied for the vacant place of steward was waiting in the ante-chamber, though he had come at ten o'clock, by appointment, to be interviewed by the Count. In

fact, the valet had suggested to the maid that she might ask her mistress whether it would not be better to wake his Excellency, as it was so late, and he did not like to oversleep himself.

'Not yet,' answered the Countess. 'Let him sleep half an hour longer.'

But she was surprised to learn how late it was, and glanced at her old travelling clock; Montalto now and then stayed in bed till nearly eleven, however, and she was glad to be alone some time longer. As he had given an appointment to a man of business, whom he would certainly see as soon as he was ready, it was quite possible that she might be left to herself till luncheon time. There were a number of little things she wished to do, and she began to occupy herself with them. Though it was the fourteenth of January she had not yet changed the calendar cards for the year in the shabby little silver stand she had used so long. The new ones needed clipping, in order to fit the old-fashioned frame that had been made for a sort no longer to be had. The note-paper in the upright case on the writing-table was almost finished too, and she replenished it from a closet in her dressing-room. She was used to doing all such things for herself, and kept her own stock of writing materials in neat order.

These and other small matters occupied her for some time. She was fitting a new piece of pencil into her sliding pencil-case when loud shouts from the square made her turn her head towards the window. Then two pistol shots followed, and there was a moment's silence.

She dropped the pencil and ran to the window, and as she reached it the savage shouting rang again through the square. She saw fifty or sixty men fighting each other, their sticks flourishing, their hats flying in all directions, their arms and legs struggling confusedly. Instantly she thought of Leone. Giuliana had said there were never any disturbances till late in the afternoon, and her maid had smiled at the mere idea that anything of the kind could happen before noon; yet there was fighting going on already, under her window. She strained her eyes to find her boy and his tall tutor in the crowd, and opened the window to see more clearly. They were not in sight — of course not! Leone was at school, and the tutor was at the public library, where he spent his mornings in study. But they must come home for luncheon, all the way from the Istituto Massimo, near the station, down to the heart of Rome; and they might be caught in a fight anywhere. She was certain that the tutor was a coward.

Something must be done at once to get the boy home in safety. She would telephone to the school that he was to wait there, and she would go for him herself. She was quite sure she could protect him much better than any man could. Who would attack a lady in her carriage? Leone should sit at her feet in the bottom of the brougham, in case a stone should break one of the windows. She could trust old Telemaco, her own coachman, for she had seen him in trouble with vicious horses, and he was cool and resolute; a man who is not afraid of a horse is generally fairly courageous in other ways.

She would tell her husband what she was going to do. No — he was still asleep. Yet it might be better to wake him — it was so late. Probably he would insist on fetching Leone himself, but she would go with him; perhaps he would be angry if she went alone. The first thing was to telephone.

The instrument was in the broad passage upon which the doors of Montalto's bedroom and dressing-room opened. They were double doors, practically sound-proof, and it was not likely that her voice at the telephone should wake him. She rang, and asked for the Istituto Massimo, and after waiting some time she was in communication with the porter of the school. He told her that it was closed, owing to the disturbances.

Her heart stopped, and then beat quickly. With difficulty she asked if Leone and his tutor had been seen. Yes, they had come at the usual time, like many other boys whose parents had not seen the notice in the papers. The notice had been inserted in all the principal evening ones yesterday. The 'little Count,' as the porter called the boy, had gone away again with the tutor. That was at half-past eight. There had been very little disturbance in that quarter of the city as yet. The porter could tell her nothing more.

Half-past eight, and it was now nearly eleven! Maria felt dizzy, and held her hand upon the telephone after she had rung off the communication. Her husband's bedroom door was just opposite her, and she knew that she must call him now. He would not forgive her if she did not, and he would be right.

She tapped upon the panel rather sharply. No answer. She knocked much louder, but no sound came, though she felt a little pain in her knuckles. The double door was well made. Rather timidly she tried it, and found it locked. She had never entered Montalto's room since he had come back, and she wondered whether there were any means of waking him, but his valet must know this, and there was no time to be lost. The man always waited in a little room further down the passage, where he cleaned his master's things, and where the bedroom bell rang. It was there that the maid always found him when Maria wished her husband to receive any message from her immediately on waking. She went forward a few steps, not remembering which was the door, and she called the servant. He came out directly, in evident surprise.

'We must wake my husband,' she said. 'I must speak to him at once; but I have knocked and tried the door, and he does not answer. Is there any way of reaching him?'

The servant produced a key from his pocket.

'His Excellency fastens the bedroom door inside, and I lock the dressing-room. The door between the rooms is never locked.'

'Go in and wake your master gently — he may be nervous and tired. Tell him I wish to speak to him.'

The man obeyed, and Maria waited on the threshold of the dressing-room. The smell of stale Havana cigarettes which she so much detested had met her as the

door opened. The sun was shining in, for the valet had already opened the blinds, lighted the fire, prepared the tub, and laid out the clothes. He pushed the bedroom door on its hinges without noise and entered in the dark to open the window. Maria waited, and her eyes fell upon a faded photograph of herself, taken soon after she had been married. It stood in a gilt frame on the dressing-table on one side of the mirror. On the other was one of Montalto's mother, in court dress, with her coronet. The frame was black and there was a white cross upon the lower edge.

While Maria was looking at these things she unconsciously listened as the valet softly called his master, softly at first, then louder — then a third time, with a kind of frightened cry. But there was no answer, and Maria pressed her hand to her heart in sudden terror. The man appeared at the door with white face and starting eyes, but he could not speak, and an instant later Maria rushed past him into the bedroom. The servant's terrified cry, his livid face, his speechless horror, all told her that her husband must be dead.

She was at the bedside now, bending down and calling him, softly at first, then louder, for he was breathing heavily; but he did not hear, he did not even stir. Maria did not cry out, for she was not frightened now; only she did not understand. The valet was beside her, pale and scared.

'He sleeps very heavily,' she said, lowering her voice instinctively, but without the least tremor. 'Have you ever seen him sleep like this?'

The servant looked at her strangely, and his words broke out, loud and sudden.

'Excellency — don't you see? It is an apoplexy! I've seen it before.'

'An apoplexy!'

She repeated the word slowly with a wondering horror, and drew back from the bedside, gazing at the dark, unconscious, upturned face, the dreadful, half-opened eyes, the knotted arteries and veins at the temple that was towards her.

'It came in his sleep,' the servant said, in an awed tone.

'Yes.' Maria was recovering her senses. 'Telephone for the doctor at once. Tell him what has happened. I will stay here.'

The man went out, still much more frightened than she was, for there is nothing, not death itself, which the Italians of the lower classes dread so much as apoplexy.

Maria smoothed the unconscious and paralysed man's pillow, and drew the bed-clothes up under his pointed grey beard, for the room was cold. That was all she could do, and when she had done it she stood upright, with folded hands, looking steadily at the dark and congested face.

Little as she knew of such things, she had heard that apoplexy was often brought on by violent fits of anger and other great emotions, and the long habit of self-accusation made her ask her conscience whether the terrible catastrophe had not come through her fault. In some way it must be so, she was sure, with all that was to follow. People often recovered, even from a bad stroke,

far enough to drag on a wretched existence for years, half paralysed, half speechless, or altogether both, but fully conscious. She would take care of him faithfully; better that than — she checked the mere thought. It was worse to be freed thus, by the suffering he was to bear, than to fear the sound of his step, to dread his touch, to feel her flesh creep at his caress. It must be worse. She must make herself understand that it was. What was all her expiation worth if she was so inhumanly cruel as to think of her own bodily freedom now? She had prayed for strength to bear, not for liberation from the terrible bond of wifehood. Was this God's answer? Never! This was fate, sudden, awful, leaping into her life to make her think evil against her will, to cut short the punishment she should have borne patiently for many years to come. She had not suffered enough yet, not half enough!

With some confused thought of imposing a duty on herself, she bent down and kissed her husband's forehead. At the same moment the servant came back, and when she stood up again he was beside her. The doctor would come at once, he said, but he would have to walk, as no carriage was safe in the streets.

For a few moments she had forgotten Leone, out in the city, somewhere, with his tutor, and at the thought, with her eyes fixed on her husband's senseless form, she felt that she might go mad. Could she leave him now, without a doctor, without a nurse? Might he not wake, suddenly conscious for an instant, to die calling for her? She knew nothing definite about such things, but she

vaguely remembered hearing that dying people sometimes revived for a few moments before the end.

Yet, if she did not leave him, who would find Leone? For she was sure she could find her boy, and she only, somewhere in Rome, and protect him and bring him home. Of all she had suffered in her suffering life those moments were the worst. She spoke to the servant in sheer desperation, to hear her own voice.

'Can we do nothing till the doctor comes?' she asked. 'Do you know of anything that ought to be done?'

But the man was at a loss. He spoke confusedly of leeches, ice, and mustard plasters. Then he remembered that there was a chemist's shop at the corner of the square; there might be a doctor there, or some one who knew what to do. When people were hurt or had a sunstroke in the street they were always carried to the chemist's, unless there were a regular ambulance-station near.

Maria grasped at the idea and sent him instantly, and she was again alone by the bedside. But she could not think now; since fear for the child had taken possession of her, there was not room for anything else. She stood motionless for more than five minutes, not even noticing the sound of low voices at the outer door of the next room; for the servant had told the footman in the hall what had happened as he hurried out on his errand, and the whole household had soon gathered in the passage.

Then Maria felt that some one was beside her, and she looked up and saw a young man with a grave, fair face, who bent over the bed without so much as speaking.

'It is a severe stroke of apoplexy,' he said, standing

upright again and looking at her. 'You must send for ice at once.'

'There is an ice-box in the house,' said the valet, who had entered the room with the young doctor, and he went away quickly to procure what was needed.

'Will he be conscious again?' Maria asked in a low voice.

'Perhaps, but probably not for two or three days.'

'Can I be of any use? Do you need me here? We have telephoned for our doctor.'

The young man looked at her in some surprise.

'No,' he said, 'I will do what can be done, if you prefer to leave the room.'

'I am afraid my little boy is lost in the streets,' Maria answered. 'I am in great anxiety. I must go out and find him.'

The young man understood the look in her face now.

'I will stay here till the doctor comes,' he said in a different tone. 'Will you kindly send one of your servants to help me? It will be better to move the patient. His head is much too low.'

'I can help you to do that,' Maria answered. 'I would rather help you myself. I am quite strong enough.'

Between them they raised the unconscious man, and propped him with pillows and cushions till he was almost in a sitting posture.

'That is all,' said the doctor. 'You can do nothing more. I will see to the rest.'

She thanked him and went out quickly, and the ser-

vants made way for her with sorrowful respect, for they all loved her.

'Go in and help,' she said to old Agostino, and passed on.

She hastened to her own room and put on a hat and a coat, the first she could find, and she took money and went through the endless rooms to the hall. It was deserted. Even the footman on duty was with the rest. But she went straight to the door. Her feet moved mechanically and swiftly, and she felt that she was guided by a mysterious power which would lead her to her child without fail by the shortest way.

She ran down the first flight of stairs to the wide landing, and as she turned the corner of the great wall that divided the staircase she almost fell against Leone's tutor, who was running up, two steps at a time.

'Alone?' she cried in utmost horror.

'Leone is safe.' He was almost breathless.

'Safe? Where?'

She did not believe him, and she saw that his right arm was in a sling made of coarse black cotton.

'He is in the barracks of the Piedmont Lancers. I came as quickly as I could, for I thought you and the Count might have heard ——'

'Yes, yes! But why there? What happened? Tell me quickly! Is he hurt?'

'Not a hair of his head.'

Maria breathed again, and leant against the wall, closing her eyes for a moment. When she opened them again she looked at the sling and saw the end of a splint and a bit of white bandage.

'But you are hurt?'

'My arm is broken. I stopped at an ambulance-station and got it more or less set, because I could not run with it hanging down. The pain was too great. It took some time, I'm sorry to say.'

Maria remembered that she had believed the tutor to be a coward.

'I am very grateful to you,' she said earnestly. 'Only tell me what I am to do about getting Leone home. How did he get to the barracks? Are you in great pain?'

'Oh, no,' answered the tutor courageously, and he told his story in few words.

On finding the school shut because riots were feared, he had thought it dangerous to bring Leone home through the city on foot, as they had come. The boy was now nine years old, and a good walker for his age, and the tutor had thought that by following the walls of the city from the station, round to the further side of the Palatine, they would be sure to keep out of any disturbances that might be going on. Leone had been delighted at the prospect, and they had started at once and encountered no rioters till they came to Porta Maggiore, when they suddenly found themselves caught between an angry crowd of labouring men, many of whom live in that quarter, and a band of citizens who came in sight just then, armed with their sticks. The rioters charged upon the latter as soon as they appeared. The tutor told Leone to run behind the citizens for safety, while he himself stood his ground to cover the boy's retreat. Fortunately Leone obeyed, but the tutor soon found him-

self in the thick of the most serious fight that took place while the strike lasted. It was interrupted by the unexpected arrival on the scene of half a troop of the Piedmont Lancers, whose quarters were then in that region. The troopers charged upon the rioters, and belaboured them with the flat of their sabres till they took to flight. To the tutor's surprise, the officer in command recognised Leone, and seemed much concerned that he should have been so near danger. He said he would take charge of him, and keep him at the barracks all day, as the city was not safe anywhere; he added that he knew the lad's father and mother, and he gave his own name. The tutor did not remember to have heard it before except in history and hoped that he had done right.

'Quite right,' Maria answered. 'I have known the Conte del Castiglione a long time.'

She turned back and went up the stairs with the tutor and told him of what had happened. Then she went to her husband's bedside again, calm and collected.

CHAPTER XXV

Nature was merciful to Montalto. Strong men have lived paralysed for years after a stroke of apoplexy, in full consciousness, yet unable to communicate their thoughts to others; but Montalto was not very strong, and he never awoke from the sleep in which his wife found him. On the fifth day the heart stopped beating, and that was the end.

There was no pain, no lucid moment, no harrowing farewell. It was the woman who endured all that a woman can bear, during those five days, not knowing but that he might come back to drag out a long and miserable existence, not daring to pray that he might die, lest she should be praying for her own freedom, yet for his sake not daring to ask that he might live and suffer. It was not until all was over that the last chance of that went out with life itself.

Maria had refused to see any one. Three times Giuliana came to the palace and asked if she could be of any use, but the answer was always the same: the Countess thanked her friend, but could not see her. Monsignor Saracinesca came twice, and he was admitted to the sick-room; but Maria would not be present, and Don Ippolito made no attempt to disturb her privacy. It was only at rare intervals that she left her husband's side for a short time, until he was dead. Each day, with the thought of

imposing a duty upon herself which he would expect, she bent down and kissed his forehead; when it was finished she kissed him once more, she knelt beside his body half an hour, and then went quietly out of the room.

She had done what she could; so far as in her lay, the expiation was complete; she might have done a little more if life had lingered a little longer; yet, as she closed her eyes, she asked herself whether she had done enough, and afterwards she remembered fancying that a cool breath of peace fanned her burning forehead for a moment before she fell asleep on a little lounge in her dressing-room.

She awoke in bed at night, and it seemed strange that there should be a soft light in the room, for she had always slept in the dark. Perhaps the light was only in her imagination, after all, for when she tried to turn her head on the pillow the glimmer seemed to go out and she fell asleep again. Once more she awoke, and it was still there, and a nursing sister with a nun's wimple and a dark blue veil was leaning over her. She tried to speak, but she was so very weak that she heard no sound, but only a sort of lisping whisper. The nurse bent nearer to her lips, and she tried to speak again.

'Have I been asleep long?' She could just whisper that.

'You have been very dangerously ill for a long time. You must not try to talk.'

The soft dark eyes looked up to the gentle face in wonder, and the lips moved again.

'Leone?' Only that word as a question.

'Quite, quite well, in Frascati with his tutor. We exchange news every day.'

Sleep again, quick and soft, and after that waking and sleep by day and night, with gradual return to thought and life, till she knew what had happened to her, and was at last well enough to see Leone for a few minutes.

He looked strangely tall in his new black clothes, and when she had kissed him and had held his face before her a moment between her beautiful thin hands, he gazed at her a long time very thoughtfully.

'The doctors said you were going to die,' he observed at last, 'but the Captain said you wouldn't. I believed the Captain.'

'What captain, dear?'

'Why, Captain Castiglione, of course. He's my friend now.'

A faint warmth rose in Maria's wasted cheeks.

'I thought you had been in Frascati,' she said.

'Yes. But the Captain has been out to see me three times a week. Didn't they tell you? Sundays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. He said he thought you wouldn't mind, because it was rather lonely for me out there with a man like my tutor, who can't ride and had a broken arm. He's given me a dog. We're great friends. Papa was going to give me a dog, you know.'

The last sentence was spoken in a lower tone, very seriously and with a sort of awe.

'Yes, dear,' Maria answered gravely, for she did not know what to say.

The handsome boy sat down and held her white hands affectionately in his brown ones, and his bright blue eyes gazed quietly at her.

'I miss papa dreadfully,' he said. 'Don't you?'

'His death has made a very great change in my life,' she answered.

'I couldn't believe it at first,' said Leone. 'When I did, I just couldn't stand it. I went and shut myself up in my room all day and thought about him.'

'Perhaps that was the best thing you could have done, dear.'

'What did you do after he was dead, mother? I want to know.'

'I fell ill at once,' Maria answered. 'I thought I was only falling asleep, and I knew nothing for more than a fortnight.'

'Yes. But before that, did you cry much?'

'No, dear. I was quite worn out, for I had scarcely left him since he had fallen ill. When he did not breathe any more, I kissed him and prayed, and then came to my own room. After that I remember nothing.'

Leone looked at her thoughtfully and rather sadly.

'I wanted to know,' he said after a while.

Maria's maid came to the door and said the tutor was waiting to take his Excellency for his afternoon walk. The nurse had sent her, thinking that Maria would be tired.

'Why do they call me "Excellency" every minute?' Leone asked. 'They hardly ever used to. Of course, I'm growing up — but still ——'

'Though you are only a boy, they look upon you as the master now, because there is no one else.'

'Am I really the master of Montalto, as papa said I should be?'

'I suppose so, dear.' Maria spoke a little wearily. 'You must go out for your walk now, and to-morrow you shall come again and stay longer.'

'Yes, much longer! Do you think it would cheer you up to see my dog to-morrow? You must be dreadfully lonely all day. I'll lend him to you, if you like.'

Maria smiled.

'Bring him with you to-morrow, if he is a cheerful little dog,' she answered, and she nearly laughed for the first time in many weeks.

Leone looked at her with satisfaction.

'You're going to get well very soon,' he said in a tone of patronising conviction. 'Good-bye.'

She watched him as he crossed the room to the door. He was thinner and taller, but he looked square and tough. He already had the figure of a little man, and at the back of his neck, above the broad turned-down collar, the short and thick brown hair seemed trying to curl more vigorously than ever. Maria saw it and shut her eyes.

She was still very weak, for it sometimes takes a long time to recover from brain fever, but she gained daily. Giuliana Parenzo came and spent long hours in the room, for she was a healthy, soothing woman, who made no noise and told Maria just how she wanted to know, asking no questions about how she felt.

At last they began to drive out together, near the end of February, when the almond-trees were in blossom and there was a breath of spring in the air.

One day they were in the Campagna and almost in sight of Acqua Santa, on the New Appian, and neither had spoken for some time. Giuliana broke the silence.

'I have a great admiration for you, Maria,' she said. 'I mean, quite apart from our friendship. I did you a great injustice in my thoughts at the beginning of the winter, and I want to tell you how sorry I am. You have been very brave and good all through this.'

'Thank you, Giuliana.' Maria touched her friend's hand affectionately.

'I'm not the only one of your friends who thinks so, either. Shall I repeat something that Ippolito Saracinesca told me the other day?'

'If it is kind, tell me. I am not quite strong yet.'

'It may make a difference to you to know it. It ought to please you. Do you remember that Ippolito and I dined with you the night before your husband fell ill?'

'Indeed I do!'

'And they argued, as usual, but afterwards they talked in a low voice.'

'I remember that too.'

'Poor Diego was talking about you. He said that whatever trouble there had ever been between you was forgotten and forgiven. He said that you had made him absolutely and unspeakably happy ever since he had come back to you, and that he wished he could have made

your life such a heaven as you had made his; that his unfortunate temper must have often irritated you and hurt you, but that he believed you had always forgiven him.'

Maria's eyes filled with tears, as they sometimes did.

'Thank you for telling me that,' she said. 'It does make a difference.'

'Ippolito never saw him conscious again. Those must have been almost the last words he ever spoke.'

'Almost,' echoed Maria, remembering that night.

'But there is something else,' Giuliana said. 'Shall I tell you? There is just one thing more.'

'Does Don Ippolito wish me to know it? He was Diego's best friend.'

'Yes. He thinks it will be easier — I mean, it will seem more natural — if it comes through me. Ippolito will never feel that he knows you very well. You understand, don't you, dear?'

'Certainly. Go on, please.' Maria prepared herself for a shock.

'Last Christmas Eve Diego went to see him, and placed in his hands a letter, to be given to you in case of his death. We have not thought you were well enough to have it until now. Your husband told Ippolito what is in the letter in case it were ever lost, and Ippolito thought best to tell me, so that you may know beforehand what it is about. You are strong enough now.'

'Yes,' Maria said, but she turned a shade whiter. 'I can bear anything now!'

'It ought to relieve you rather than pain you,' answered Giuliana. 'The letter is meant to give you his full consent to marry again, in case he died. But he added ——'

Telemaco suddenly checked his horses to a walk at the steep hill, and it was impossible for Giuliana to go on talking in the low phaeton without being heard, unless she spoke in a foreign language. Maria grew whiter.

'A little faster,' said Giuliana to the coachman. 'You can stop at the top of the hill.'

The New Appian Road is paved throughout, and the horses' hoofs began to clatter on the stones again. Maria waited to hear the rest.

'He added that if you married again he thought it would be your duty to marry Baldassare — your duty before God and your duty to society. Yes, dear, what did you say?'

Maria had uttered a little exclamation and had turned her face quite away.

For the first time since her friend had known her the tears overflowed, and Giuliana, leaning forwards a little, could just see two glistening drops on her pale cheek. When Maria turned again she shook her head slowly.

'No,' she said in a low voice. 'It is too much, it is too generous. I must never marry him. I must never think of him again. I promised Diego that I would tear the memory from my heart, and I must. God help me, for I must.'

Giuliana opened her little bag, a marvel of workmanship fresh from Paris.

'Here is the letter, Maria,' she said. 'You must have it now, for it freely gives you back the promise you made. Read it when you are alone.'

Maria took the letter in silence; and under her black fur-lined cloak, heavy with crape, she loosened her dress and laid the sealed envelope upon her bare neck, a little to the left, where she had laid the letter the monk had given her from Castiglione, some two months ago, that seemed like ages of ages now.

Just then the horses stopped at the top of the hill, where a lane turns to the right, leading to Acqua Santa and the golf links. A large closed carriage with black horses and plain black liveries was coming rapidly from the opposite direction.

As it passed the phaeton Giuliana and Maria bowed far forwards, for there was a cardinal inside whom they both knew, an old man and a good one. In answer to their salutation he smiled, and Maria saw the aged hand, white and ungloved, lifted at the open window to give a blessing that might have seemed prophetic just then.

* * * * * *

Months have passed since that afternoon and many things have happened. Casalmaggiore never got the Andalusian mare, for only Leone rides her, and he would not part with her for anything. Monsieur de Maurienne never came back from Paris, but managed to be sent to Vienna instead, and Donna Teresa is still an unprotected widow. The Countess of Montalto is herself again, and still in half-mourning for her husband.

During these hot August days she is living quietly at

Montalto with Leone and his tutor; for she felt that if she did not come to the place now it would be harder to come back later and face its associations; and besides, Leone is to be the master when he is grown up, and he must begin to learn what that means.

He comes in at tea-time, a straight, square boy in well-worn riding clothes, his fox-terrier at his heels.

'I wish the Captain were here, mama,' he says suddenly. 'It would be such fun to ride together. I don't see why you shouldn't ask him for a few days.'

'Not now, little man,' says Maria, pouring out the boy's tea. 'But perhaps he may come another year and stay a long time.'

She rises and sets the cup on a little table beside him with a good slice of bread and butter, and she stands over him as if to make him eat and drink. But when he bends his handsome head she stoops and kisses the back of his sturdy neck where the short brown hair is always doing its very best to curl.

NOTE. — The 'Piedmont Lancers,' to which Castiglione belonged, are purely imaginary, and are by no means meant for the 'Piedmont Regiment,' which would be more rightly classed with the Dragoons.

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